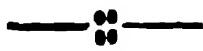


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"The first time I saw Amy Neal she was breezy, buoyant, and fresh out of jail." The time was three in the morning, the place the doorway of a suite in the Plaza Hotel, and the speaker Lee Medford—a top-flight public-relations man who had been engaged to tone down and dignify Amy's publicity.

There was nothing wrong with Amy Neal, except that she happened to have written a best-selling novel that had also become a book-club selection and had been sold to the movies. To promote the book and the movie, Amy was all over the town: at theatre first-nights, movie premières, autographing parties, lunches at "21," dinners at the Colony—Amy, a young, modest, midwestern housewife, was the sacrificial victim of over-zealous press agenting. This is the story of how Lee Medford set about providing the intractable Amy with a new public image, and of the near-disastrous results of his efforts.

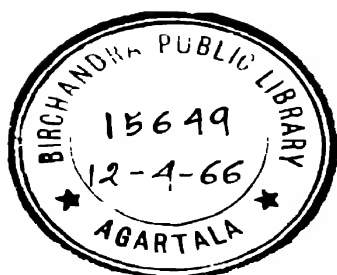
Joe Morgan, author of Expense Account, takes a freshly satirical look at the absurdities of the communications industry in this lively and amusing novel.

Also by the author

EXPENSE ACCOUNT

JOE MORGAN

AMY GO HOME



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LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO. LTD.
48 Grosvenor Street, London, W.1
*Associated companies, branches and representatives
throughout the world*

*Printed offset-lithography in Great Britain
by Bradford and Dickens Limited, London*

FOR JEANNE

Whatever became of what's-her-name?"

He was leaning against the bar and making small talk while looking past me into the corners of the room, searching for someone.

"Who's what's-her-name?"

"Oh you know." And he was right. I knew, and so did he; but it was like Walter Driscoll to pretend he couldn't remember the name of someone who was famous.

"I mean that writer." He was getting impatient. "That one we had the thing with out in Indiana."

Instead of answering, I took a sip of my drink, and he gave up pretending.

"I know now," Walter said. "Amy Neal."

He looked as if Amy should be pleased with him for remembering.

"What was her book?" His eyes were on the prow again, and he was listing farther to port, so I wouldn't obstruct the view. "Heart of the something-or-other?"

Talking with Walter wasn't a conversation; it was a quiz. And a rigged one, too, because he nearly always had the answers.

Knowing this, I waited until he said, HOME OF THE HEART.

"That's it," he added, looking as if he had awarded himself first prize. "But whatever happened to Amy? Man what . . ."

I was wondering if I should punch him now, or wait for him to finish, but he quit talking and began smiling, not at me but past me.

"Lee," he asked, "will you excuse me a minute?" He was gone before I could say "No."

Near the door a man shook Walter's hand, smiling as if he were happy to see him. Disliking Walter isn't easy; first you have to get to know him.

Since I knew him, it was my fault that I had not hurried by without speaking when we passed on the street. Instead, I had let him buy me a drink, and now I would have to buy him one. In another culture we would have had at each other with clubs or stones, but in our wry world we smiled, we shook hands, and we bought the drinks.

I hadn't seen him for a couple of years, not since what he called "the thing" out in Indiana, and in a way I suppose I owed him more than he knew and more than I was willing to admit for what had happened since then.

Now, because of him, I had missed my train to Darien and had been left alone to drink a highball I didn't really want, but somehow, in the smoky twilight of the bar and the balmy communion of the cocktail hour, I didn't mind. I was thinking of Amy, straight from the time we met, and I couldn't wish for more than that . . .

Chapter 1

THE first time I saw Amy Neal she was breezy, buoyant, winsome, and fresh out of jail.

Right then she was at her peak. Her first novel was an amazing success, the number one best seller, a book club selection, a natural for the movies, and the leading candidate for the Pulitzer Prize. To promote the book, and the film that was to be made from it, Amy was all over town; at theater first nights, movie premieres, ship christenings, library benefits, charity balls, and the opening of supermarkets. She went to breakfasts at the Waldorf, brunches at the Park Lane, lunches at "21," dinners at the Colony, and literary cocktail parties anywhere. Her autographing sessions took her to bookstores, department stores, drug stores, and discount houses. She was seen on all the television channels from 2 through 13 and heard on the radio from ABC to QXR. Literary societies from the Bronx to the Battery had heard her lecture, and, next to free drinks, she had been the major attraction at re-

ceptions from the United Nations on the East River to ocean liners at their piers across town in the Hudson.

Yet, up until the night I was hired by Albert Foshay I never had met her, one reason being that I thought lady authors were apt to have stringy hair, dull faces, and sharp tongues.

So it was partly my own fault that I had to introduce myself by beating on the door of Amy Neal's suite in the Plaza Hotel at three o'clock in the morning.

She tried to ignore me, but I kept knocking and calling 'Miss Neal, Miss Neal,' as if I were there to warn her the building was on fire, and at last she answered.

"Go away," she said.

"Miss Neal," I announced through the closed door, "I'm Lee Medford."

"What do you want?"

Silently, I cursed Foshay; he was to have told her I was coming.

"Albert Foshay sent me."

"Father O'Shea?" She sounded confused. "But I'm a Methodist."

"Not O'Shea, Foshay." With the door between us, it was like talking over a poor telephone connection. "Albert Foshay, the producer, the one who's going to make a movie of your novel."

I was almost shouting, but apparently not loud enough because she said:

"I'm sorry, but I don't have anything to do with that. If you want a part in the movie you'll have to see Mr. Foshay."

I must have moaned a little. Since I could hear her fairly well but she seemed unable to understand me, I began to entertain the suspicion that she was "smashed"; and since my vision of her, even sober, was that of a potato sack with hair, the thought was enough to give me the whim-whams.

"Miss Neal," I said, speaking slowly and carefully, "Can you hear me? Shall I talk louder?"

"For god's sake, no." The deep voice came from behind me. Over my shoulder I got a glimpse of the tousled head and blinking eyes of the occupant of the room across the hall.

"Pipe down, will you Mac?" he pleaded. "It's three A.M."

"Sorry," I mumbled. "It's an, ah, emergency."

As he closed the door, I heard a woman's voice telling him, "Paul, we should have gone to the Waldorf."

In Amy Neal's suite I could hear a telephone ringing, and then, her voice, although I wasn't able to make out what she was saying.

Standing there in the corridor, scorned by Amy and scolded by her neighbor, I began to feel foolish, and when I feel foolish I get mad, and when I get mad I'm apt to hit something. I began banging on the door so hard my fist went numb while I shouted, "Miss Neal, I've got to talk to you; please open the door."

She didn't open it, but she did start talking again.

"What did you say your name was?"

"Lee Medford."

"How do I know that's who you are?" In spite of my temper, frustration, and embarrassment I noticed she had a melodious voice, with overtones of a midwest twang.

Pulling out my wallet, I said, "Open the door and I'll give you my card."

"Shove it under the door," she said, and I was doing that when, from across the hall, Paul peeked out.

"Mac, are you going to go away or am I going to have to call the cops?" he growled.

"S'all right," I said, and that was the biggest lie I'd told all week. "Just be a minute," I promised, getting up off my knees.

"What's he doing now, Paul?" asked the woman.

"Beats me," he mumbled. "Seems to be looking for a key hole. Must be a Peeping Tom."

"I do wish we'd gone to the Waldorf," said the woman.

She had my sympathy because I wished I were somewhere else too, anywhere, while I listened to Amy Neal read my card aloud: " 'Lee Medford, president, Lee Medford Associates, Counselors in Public Relations.' Is that you?"

"Yes," I said, and I found myself nodding at the closed door. "May I come in now?"

"No."

"No?" I hadn't been so close to tears since my dog died when I was ten years old. "Why not?"

"Because I haven't any clothes on."

My god, I thought, smashed *and* crazy. "Miss Neal," I said patiently, "put some clothes on while I wait."

"I can't; I'm taking a sun bath."

"In the middle of the night?" If I'd had a rope, I would have been at the end of it.

"Yes, with a sun lamp."

"Look, Miss Neal." I tried not to sound desperate. "Please get dressed. I simply have to see you; it's for your own interests."

In the moment of silence that followed I heard the door to Paul's room opening again before Amy said, "Tell you what I'll do. I'll unlock the door and you can come in for two minutes if you'll keep your eyes closed."

"What now?" asked Paul's roommate.

"Beats me," he said. "Must be some kind of sex maniacs, both of 'em." He slammed the door hard.

"Hurry up," I begged.

"All right," Amy said, "now I'll unlock the door and you count to ten, then come in with your eyes closed. Promise?"

"I promise." By then I would have agreed to anything to get out of that corridor.

The latch clicked, I counted three, and then I walked in.

"You're cheating, Mr. Medford, you're cheating."

So I was; but so was she. She was standing there, fully dressed, laughing her head off.

"You can stop squinting now, Mr. Medford," she said.

With my eyes wide open, I was in for a surprise; she was quite pretty, for a lady author. And sober. She was dressed in a trim skirt, a flowered blouse with a stand-up collar, and high-heeled pumps, an outfit she could have worn to church. She had an oval face with big, round green eyes and full lips framing a mouth that was neatly formed, if a little too big. She was holding my card and studying it.

"Very impressive," she said.

Closing the door, I asked, "Why are you giving me such a hard time?"

"I'm sorry," she said, and, with surprise, I could see from her softly expressive eyes that she really was. I tried to remember the last time I had heard a woman say she was sorry and mean it. "It's just that after what happened tonight I'm so fed up with press agents I'd like to see them all suffer a little. But I suppose I've been unfair to you."

"I'm not a press agent; I'm in public relations." I didn't mean to sound stuffy, but I suppose I did because she glanced at the card, and I could see the hard glint of skepticism mirrored in her eyes. "The people who run Foshay Productions have decided you need less press agency and more public relations," I added quickly. "That's why I'm here."

The phone rang, and she went to the desk in the corner of the room to answer it.

"No," she said, "nothing's wrong. There was a little misunderstanding, that's all . . . thank you for calling."

She put down the phone and smiled, as if enjoying a private joke. "That was the hotel manager's office. They wanted to know if a man was annoying me."

"Am I?"

"Yes, but not in the way they think." She sat on the couch and waved me toward a chair. "I didn't let you in at first because I didn't know who you were. Mr. Foshay phoned

while you were pounding on the door, but he didn't explain much; you know I can hardly understand him anyway, the way he talks. He starts a sentence, drops it, then gives you only the tail end of the next one. It's a kind of verbal shorthand, and if you can't fill in the blanks you're lost, you know."

I didn't know, but I nodded. Albert Foshay was a stranger to me even though he was now a client.

"Forgive me for treating you badly, even after I found out why you were here," she continued. "But a couple of hours ago I decided I already had one press agent too many. I mean Frankie Moline, you know."

"Yes," I said. That much I did know.

"If I could get my hands on that man, I'd strangle him." As she went through the motions of twisting Frankie Moline's head right off his shoulders I had the feeling that she meant it.

"That's why I'm here," I explained quickly, "to rescue you from the likes of Frankie Moline. Foshay Productions has decided that you need more dignified handling."

When Amy winced I realized that "handling" was the wrong word. "Please," she said, "if you don't mind, after tonight, I'd just as soon not be handled at all."

Before I could go on, the phone started ringing, and she asked if I would excuse her. "That's probably my call to Cedar Rapids. I've been trying to reach my husband; he's a salesman now traveling in Iowa, and I want to explain tonight's rumpus before he reads about it in the newspapers."

Picking up the phone, she said, "Hello, darling" in a voice that made me envy him.

"Nothing's wrong, Arthur, nothing serious, that is . . . Yes, I know it's the middle of the night . . . Well, I'm sorry if I woke you up, but I do want to talk to you about something . . . No dear, I'm not pregnant . . . Well I'm trying to tell you if you'll let me . . . It's just that there's been a little, ah,

ruckus down here that I wanted to tell you about before you read it in the newspapers . . . Yes, the newspapers . . . I know, I know . . . I don't like it either . . ."

As Amy explained what had happened, I picked up a magazine and pretended to be reading.

"This is all going to sound rather far out, but it's true and it's a long story, so don't interrupt me," she said. "The way it began was that I went to the Broadway premiere of a movie—it's a Foshay production called *Bengal Bay*. You remember, Foshay Productions bought the movie rights to *the* book. Well, Frankie Moline—he's that press agent you met that weekend you were down here—well, he decided it would be good publicity for HOME OF THE HEART for me to attend the premiere, escorted by something called the Sultan of Seismar who was technical advisor, or something, for *Bengal Bay*. The trouble was that the Sultan and I didn't exactly hit it off. For one thing, his English was so poor I hardly understood a word he said, and if he understood what I was saying he didn't pay any attention. He also seemed to be under the mistaken impression that I was fascinated by his charm."

I had given up the pretense of reading, and when she noticed I was watching her she motioned for me to bring her a cigarette. As I lighted it for her I could hear enough from the other end of the wire to know that her husband was offering to come to New York to deal with the Sultan man to man, face to face, hand to hand.

"That won't be necessary," she told him. "I took care of him myself. And, Arthur, please don't interrupt. Everything was all right until we went to El Morocco, after the premiere, for a supper party Mr. Foshay was giving. That's when the Sultan started pinching me . . . Where? . . . Oh, the usual places . . . Why? . . . How the hell should I know why? Maybe that's the way he passes the time back at the old harem. Really, Arthur, I think it's time you had a talk with your father . . . All right, all right, I know it's not funny and

I'm sorry. But anyway he kept fingering the merchandise until I lost my temper, and my head, and jumped up and took a swing at him. Honestly, I don't think I hit him, but he ducked, and he must have hit his head on the corner of the table. Anyway, there he was out cold—unconscious. That's when I got arrested."

She had to stop talking then because Arthur began shouting. I was too far away to hear it all, but I got the general impression that he was expressing his opinion of night club brawling, and, although there was no doubt he was opposed to the practice, Amy listened with a tolerant half smile. After a while she tried to cool him off.

"Now Arthur, don't get excited," she said. "I'm not in jail, not now, and you're not going to have to visit me in Sing Sing. A couple of the Sultan's stooges got excited when they saw the old rake collapsed on the table and decided I had killed him. It was just a mix-up."

She paused long enough to blow a smoke ring before continuing. "They ran out and got a policeman, and before I really knew what was going on I was at the station being booked for assault and battery. But it didn't take. Within fifteen minutes Mr. Foshay had routed out so many lawyers they could have had a meeting of the American Bar Association right there in the station house. There was a lot of arm-waving and yelling, and then they told me I could go. I guess the charge was dropped; everybody was so excited they didn't bother to tell me. And if it isn't, don't worry. I'll file countercharges. How about 'trespassing on private property' for one?"

That seemed to calm him down, and after some small talk and an exchange of endearments that sent me back to studying the magazine Amy hung up and turned to me.

"Poor Arthur," she sighed, pushing back the hair that had fallen over one eye. "He's not used to having his wife get into fights in night clubs."

She snuffed out her cigarette and came back to the couch.

"Now," she asked, "what is it you are going to do for my public relations at this hour?"

"For a starter," I said, "I'd like to get you out of here, to some place where the reporters can't find you."

She shook her head. "Too late, they've been here."

"All of them?"

"No, just the morning papers, plus UPI and AP."

"Did you tell them anything?"

"Well, I told them what happened. Why not?"

I didn't answer because I was still thinking of reasons why not. The first reason, as far as I was concerned, was that having her quoted in the newspapers was going to embarrass me with the people who had hired me. The less they read about the El Morocco affair, the better it was going to be for me. Right then wasn't the time to explain all this to Amy, but anything that happened that would put me in a bad light was going to be just fine with Albert Foshay. I had been hired not because of Foshay but in spite of him. Behind it all was the maneuvering that was going on for control of Foshay Productions, Inc., and the man who drew me into the promotion of *HOME OF THE HEART* was not Albert Foshay but Herb Gardner, a Wall Street investment banker who was a director of Foshay Productions.

Amy apparently sensed that I was displeased because she repeated, "Why not?"

So I told her. "The less there is in the newspapers about your fracas with the Sultan, the better it will be for all of us."

"Oh." Amy thought that over for a moment before she asked, "Couldn't you call up somebody at the papers and ask them not to print it?"

She made it sound so simple that I hated to disillusion her. "No, I can't do anything about what's already been done. Nobody can. But we can do something about what's still to happen. It won't be long before the reporters for the after-

noon papers will be here, and the best thing for us to do is to leave, right now."

"You mean you don't want me to talk to reporters?" Amy was confused.

"Not right now."

"Well," she said, thinking it over, "that's a switch."

Ten minutes later she had packed an overnight bag, and we were getting into a taxi.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"First, I thought we'd stop at my apartment and have some breakfast," I told her. "That will give us time to think about the next move."

Amy looked dubious. "Does Mrs. Medford mind when you bring strange women home in the middle of the night?"

"There is no Mrs. Medford."

"Oh." Amy brushed the hair back from over her eye, and it was obvious what she was thinking.

"I don't suppose you live with your sweet little old mother," she said.

"No."

"A maiden aunt maybe?"

I shook my head.

"A housemother?"

"A dog?"

"A cat?"

"A mistress?"

I said no each time.

She looked so apprehensive I couldn't help laughing, and that made her frown. "Don't fuss," I told her. "When I have the choice between making money and making out with a girl, the dollar always wins. And right now I'm working."

She smiled, but tentatively.

"Anyway," I added, rubbing the side of my head, "I know what happened to the Sultan."

"Okay, Sultan," said the cab driver, "where do you wanna go?"

I gave him my Sutton Place address, and as we pulled away from the hotel Amy said, "I keep telling people that until I came to New York I'd never ridden in a taxi, but nobody believes me. I don't suppose you believe me either."

It was odd, but I *did* believe her.

"I've always lived in small towns," Amy continued, "and nobody rides in cabs there because there's no reason to."

"Where ya from, lady, Mongolia?" The cab driver was all ears.

"No, Minnesota."

"Same t'ing," said the driver with all the authority of fifty years of ignorance.

For a moment, I thought Amy was going to give him what the Sultan got, but I sidetracked her by saying, "I believe you."

"Really?" she had a smile that was all charm.

"Sure I do. Because I grew up in a small town too."

"Where?"

"Weeping Water, Nebraska."

She threw back her head and laughed out loud. "Now you're putting me on."

"No I'm not; Scout's honor." I gave her the sign. "There really is a Weeping Water. When we get to my place I'll prove it."

Amy liked the apartment. She stood at the window in the living room watching the lights across the river while I put the coffee on in the kitchen. Then she came out and sat on a stool at the breakfast bar.

"How do you like your coffee?" I asked. "Cream? Sugar? Irish? Or straight?"

"Straight." Impatiently, she brushed the hair away from her eye. "I've got to get rid of this hairdo. Makes me look like a call girl who's been called too often."

Ordinarily I would have said it looked great the way it was, but something about Amy Neal stopped me. I didn't believe it, so I didn't say it.

Instead, I said, "Miss Neal, you must be tired."

She was quick to correct me. "It's not Miss Neal—it's Phillips, Mrs. Arthur Phillips. I used my maiden name on the book."

In the cupboard I had found a box of cookies that I opened and passed to her.

"But you're right about me being tired." With her fingertips she rubbed the edge of her scalp as if trying to arouse her thoughts. "I've been up since 5:30 this—or rather yesterday—morning, bouncing all over town like a rubber ball. Let me show you something."

She went into the living room and came back with an oversized purse from which she pulled an oversized engagement book.

"Look at this," she said, opening the book on the table in front of me. "From 6:30 in the morning until after midnight, hardly a minute to call my own." She was beginning to fume, her eyes growing dark with irritation.

"See!" She pointed to the day's first entry under 6:30 A.M., as if that were proof enough of man's inhumanity to man. "Report at studio for interview on Manhattan Almanac television show at 7:00 A.M.," it read.

She frowned as she thought about it. "I was on the air from 7:07 to just past 7:08—about ninety seconds in between the commercials for a perfume and a deodorant. I guess they were afraid I'd smell up the airways." Her laugh was without humor.

She took another cookie and bit into it so hard her teeth clicked. "Look here." She pointed at her appointment book under 8:00 A.M. where it said, "Breakfast with Sara Henry to discuss possible article."

"That's a magazine editor who wants me to write some-

thing for her," Amy explained. "The only trouble was I couldn't think of anything to write and neither could she, not even after she'd had three Bloody Marys. Another complete waste of time. I could have gone back to bed." Her nostrils quivered peevisly.

She jabbed her finger at the book again, pointing to 10:00 A.M. where she had written, "Interview on Johnny Tucker Show (taping for radio)."

"I was there at ten o'clock sharp," she said, biting off the words as if she had to chew them well before swallowing. "But was Johnny Tucker? Oh no, not him; he was home in bed snoozing soundly while I talked on the record for ten minutes. 'Just talk,' they told me, 'and we'll think up the questions later.' It was as if I were three years old; you know, 'say something for the nice people, Amy.' Imagine that; Johnny Tucker will dub in the questions whenever he feels like it. I give him the answers, then he asks the questions. Holy Moley! That's crazy."

I agreed that it was and passed the cookies.

"Well," she said, picking up the book again, "here we are at 11:00 A.M. 'Publicity pictures at Foshay Productions' New York studio.' I was wearing what I have on now *and* my mink coat but that photographer somehow made me feel as if I were posing for French post cards. Holy Moley! That took until noon when I had to go to the Colony for lunch with George Schaffer—he's the promotion manager for Owen Boice and Company, the publishers—and a woman from the literary supplement of a newspaper in Chicago. She got her interview, George got loaded on martinis, and I got heartburn."

She took a cookie without waiting for me to pass them, and while she munched on it she pointed to the next entry in her book. "2:30 P.M.—report at studio for 3:00 P.M. appearance on the 'Just Us Girls' television show." She explained that she appeared on a panel with a pair of bosomy actresses.

"Every time I'd open my mouth both of them would start talking. I don't recall saying a thing."

Her next entry was for 4:00 P.M.—"Tea and autographing at the Pierre." She massaged the edge of her scalp again as she thought about it. "It was a charity deal where they auctioned off autographed copies of *HOME OF THE HEART*. The first bid was from a sweet little old lady in a Dior original and a diamond collar. She bid seventy-five cents."

The corner of her mouth twitched, and her full, red lips swelled into a pout that seemed to beg for kissing, as tempting a target as I'd seen in a long while. But the businessman in me was prompt with the reminder that she was a client and that romance was not among the services rendered by Lee Medford Associates. Anyway, I knew she'd clout me if I tried. So I passed the cookies and waited until she began to look mad again, instead of sorry for herself, and pointed to the entry for 5:00 P.M. "Cocktails with Frankie Moline," she said. "That was so he could introduce me to the Sultan."

She added that at six she had a sandwich alone in her hotel suite, and at eight she left for the theater with the Sultan.

"The rest, I hope, is history," she said. With her eyes closed, she rubbed her forehead with the fingers of both hands while she went on talking. "How I yearn for the good old days when all I had to do was to cook, clean, wash and iron, be a mother to my son, act as chauffeur, bookkeeper and shopper, paint the kitchen, go to P.T.A. meetings, collect money for the Community Fund, and go bowling with Arthur. No press agents then. No interviews. No martinis. No smiling for the cameras. No being pleasant while sweet old ladies offer seventy-five cents for my book. I should have stayed in Minnesota."

With her elbows resting on the table and her chin propped in her hands, she stared at me in a sulky silence that seemed to dare me to disagree.

For a moment I was tempted.

As I listened I had been coming to a slow boil. I wanted to ask her how many of her books would have been sold if she'd hidden away in Minnesota. I wanted to know if she thought her novel had any chance of being the number one best seller without promotion of the author as well as the book. I wondered if she thought she could afford a suite at the Plaza and that mink coat if all those people hadn't put their time and money into making her a celebrity. I'd have liked to ask her if she was an ingrate, or just stupid.

I'd have liked to, but I didn't. Instead, I passed the cookies and said nothing.

Some day, and soon, I would tell her that this horrible promotional whirl was what sold books, that it was what made the difference between Mrs. Arthur Phillips, housewife, and Amy Neal, best-selling author. Some day, but not now. This was not the time nor the place to start a row with a brand new client; it was only a time to change the subject.

"How long," I asked, "have you been writing?"

That got her to talking about herself, and while I put a fresh pot of coffee on the stove she told me she was born in Hawleyville, Indiana, and lived there until she went to college where she married Arthur Phillips.

"Hawleyville is down in Indiana, way down," she said. "It's the kind of town everybody loves, except me. I didn't care for it much."

Her accents and inflections were from deep in James Whitcomb Riley country, with a timbre gentle as a lullaby.

"My trouble, I guess, was that my mother died when I was small, and I was raised by an aunt I hated. Still do, for that matter. Not having a mother, of course I idolized my father, but we never were close. He had a little jewelry store and watch repair business, and that kept him busy most of the time. When he wasn't working he mostly played cards at the Elks Club; I suppose he was lonely without my mother. But

he was kind and gentle, and I loved him until he got a lung disease and died when I was sixteen."

She squeezed a piece of a cookie until it crumbled into bits on the table. "I inherited a little money, and when it was time to go to college I left home for good. I've never been back although sometimes I get curious, wondering what it's like there now. My aunt still lives in the house. Takes in roomers."

Arthur Phillips came into her life when she was enlisted to tutor him in a course he was failing.

"He was an All-American basketball player," she explained, as if that were reason enough for being dumb.

While she drank another cup of coffee I found out that Laketon, Minnesota, was their home now and that her husband was a salesman for a sporting goods firm. They had a ten-year-old son named Randolph, who was being cared for during Amy's absence by a housekeeper named Mrs. Lund.

By then it was daylight, and we went into the living room to watch the sun come up, over the river and beyond the factories and warehouses of Queens.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" said Amy.

I nodded. "Somebody or other has described it as the world's most beautiful used car lot."

"Hah." She turned on me, waving a finger under my nose. "That proves there's no such place as Weeping Water; anyone from a place like that would be entranced by a sight like this."

"Don't bet on it," I told her, and I got out the map and pointed to Weeping Water. But then I did a curious thing that I couldn't understand, not at the time.

I confessed I'm not really a native of Weeping Water.

"It's a gimmick." I felt sheepish about it, but I kept talking away. "Who would remember if I told the truth—that I was born in Omaha? But Weeping Water! Who can forget it?"

Anyway, I've been telling that story for so long I half believe it; and I guess that makes it only half a lie."

Amy laughed, and so did I, even while I was wondering why I had this compulsion to tell her the truth about something that I never had told anyone else and that didn't really matter anyway.

"I'll never believe you again," said Amy, but she was willing to take my word for it when I suggested a small hotel off Park Avenue in the Thirties as the place for her to stay for a couple of days until the newspapers remembered her as a writer instead of the greatest one-punch fighter since Joe Louis.

"This is a perfect place to get lost in," I told her as the cab pulled up to the entrance, and, although I didn't mention it, I spoke from experience. The hotel's slogan very well might have been "Discreet service for the indiscreet." By the warmth of its welcome and the impeccable nature of its furnishings, the hotel provided a built-in sense of dignity and self-esteem that could nip any germinating doubts about the propriety of the behavior behind those solid oak doors.

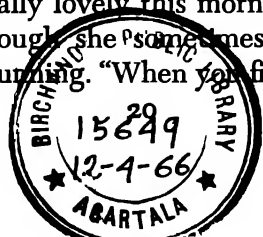
It was, I thought, an admirable choice, and I expected Amy to commend me as she glanced casually around the lobby. But all she gave me was a wry smile before she murmured, "Back Street."

Chapter 2

WHEN I got to the office my secretary already was busy at her desk, eating breakfast. Orange juice, sweet rolls, and coffee. She licked her fingers, nodded, and favored me with a smile as I said, "Good morning, Dora, it's a pleasure to see you."

Any time I saw Dora Watkins it had to be a pleasure because the odds against her showing up for work on a given day were about 5-2. Her record of absenteeism must have been the envy of every stenographer in town and the talk of Chock full o'Nuts. She was tall, blonde, and fragile. In three years on my payroll she had suffered afflictions that would have stumped the Mayo brothers. Have you ever known anyone with glossopyrosis? Well Dora had it twice in one month.

"You look especially lovely this morning," I told her. If I was wheedling enough she sometimes stayed healthy for three or four days running. "When you finish your coffee, will



you please go down to the book store in the lobby and buy me a copy of HOME OF THE HEART?"

"Um-hm-m," Dora nodded while taking another bite of her roll. She was in a hurry to finish breakfast before it was time for her coffee break.

"Any time this morning," I added, meaning right now.

"This morning?" Dora brushed a few crumbs to the floor; she kept a neat desk.

"Yes, please." I had to say please because if I didn't, Dora was sure to come down with something like gastroenteritis or sarcoidosis that would keep her out for the rest of the week. And I restrained the impulse to add, "and hurry up," a remark that would have laid her up for a week to ten days with mononucleosis or diverticulitis, a couple of old favorites. Just as Mondays, Fridays, and the days after holidays were preferred for short-term illnesses.

"Right away?" If Dora had belonged to a union she would have turned me in to the shop steward for instituting a speed-up.

"As soon as you can," I said, but when she seemed about to sneeze I quickly added, "when it's convenient."

By now I wished I had stopped and bought the book myself because if I was going to promote HOME OF THE HEART I had to know what it was about, and quickly.

Excusing myself, I went into my office, threw my hat and coat on a chair, and spread the morning papers out on the desk. The time had come to face up to what they had to say about Amy. Which was plenty.

There she was, all over the front page of the tabloid—with pictures of her leaving the police station.

"AFTER THE BRAWL WAS OVER," said the cutline beneath one of them.

"WAS SULTAN INSULTIN?" asked the other.

Very cute.

Inside, one of the papers had photographs labeled, "BE-

FORE" and "AFTER." The first showed Amy and the Sultan arriving at the theater for the premiere. The other was a shot of Amy at the police station. In all the pictures she was wearing a mink coat and a placid expression, not posing or simpering and not scared or contrite either. The lady had poise.

I was still studying the pictures when Lars Johnston came in and peered over my shoulder.

"Hey," he asked, "who's the broad?"

"Please, Swede," I said, handing him the paper. "That is the woman we love—a new client."

As he read, I watched confusion flower into bewilderment, all the way from his blue eyes, past his snub nose to his square chin that sagged with disbelief. Lars was the "associates," all of them, of "Lee Medford Associates," and he was, perhaps, the perfect assistant because of his passionate devotion to detail; a characteristic that also made him a chronic worrier.

No possibility is too remote, no event too small to be unworthy of his expressions of alarm, with a single exception. When a woman is involved, caution deserts him.

Anxiety furrows his brow and apprehension clouds his eyes. He is an habitual pessimist who fears the worst, but show him a skirt, and the worst is good enough for him. His attitude toward the other sex is absolutely democratic; he covets them all without regard to race, creed, age, size, social status, or marital standing. Lest somewhere a drab and aging spinster feels unloved and undesired by any man, let her take heart from the thought that Lars Johnston is abroad in the world and that some day he'll find her.

"Hey," he asked, pointing at Amy's picture. "*This* is a client?"

I nodded. "Foshay Productions, Inc., has hired us to look after her. Sort of a baby-sitting job."

"Some baby," he muttered, raising the paper closer to his

eyes so he could study the details. "Looks a little hippy, though."

How he could he tell that when she was wearing a fur coat, I don't know. But he was right.

He laid the paper down and shook his head, as if to clear it. "But *us* in show business?" He acted as if I had told him we were going to peddle a little heroin on the side. "That's not our line. We're in corporate public relations. Remember?"

Leaning back in the chair, I rested my feet on the desk. I wanted to show him how relaxed I was.

"Sit down," I said, "and I'll tell you about it. I took this on because it's going to lead to something better. Like maybe the public relations account for all of Foshay Productions."

Then I told him about Herb Gardner, the investment banker, and about his relation to Albert Foshay.

"Gardner and his crowd are heavy investors in Foshay Productions, and they take a jaundiced view of the way Foshay runs the company. You've heard of Foshay. He's a free-spending throwback to the old days before television, and Gardner feels his management is wasteful, too much like a three ring circus, and lacking in good taste."

Swede stood up and began pacing the floor. "Hey, how about us? What's our bit?"

"Just this." I took my feet off the desk because the left one had gone to sleep, and anyway I wasn't all that relaxed. "The interest that Gardner and his bunch have in Foshay Productions isn't quite big enough to oust old Albert, not yet. But they figure they're going to get the company eventually, and they want to be sure there's something left when they do. So they keep horning in on the management, and Foshay has to go along because he isn't anxious to mix it up in a proxy fight. He might lose."

Johnston had quit pacing and had started tying knots in

the cord of the window blind. "Where do we come in?" he asked.

"I'll get there," I promised. "Gardner was at El Morocco last night when Amy let the Sultan have it. Foshay was having a party after the premiere. So right then he took Foshay aside and told him the promotion of *HOME OF THE HEART* had to be upgraded. I think Gardner suspects that brawl last night was staged—a press agent stunt."

"Was it?" Swede began untying the knots in the cord.

"It's possible Moline dreamed it up—with the cooperation of the Sultan—knowing how Amy would react. I do know that if it was a stunt and Amy Neal finds out, she'll beat Frankie Moline to death with a bagel at high noon in front of the whole mob at Lindy's."

"And Gardner put the finger on us because he liked the job we did for him in that trucking firm proxy fight?"

"Yes," I nodded. "That's it."

"Well, I don't know . . ."

Dora Watkins walked into the room before Johnston could finish expressing his doubts, and I thought of suggesting she might knock first. But I knew that would upset the balance between her red and white corpuscles in a way that would cause her to stay home for two weeks. And Dora part of the time was better than other secretaries all of the time. She could spell.

"I have the book." She started to hand it to me, but I waved her away.

"Please skim through it and let me know what it's about," I told her.

Dora nodded, and although she said nothing, I knew what she thought. She thought I was some kind of a nut.

Her sigh was audible, and I thought I got the message, too, when she put an extra wiggle-waggle in her hips as she passed Lars on her way out.

"Need I remind you?" I asked, looking at the door Dora had closed behind her.

"Oh no, I remember," he rumbled. His voice was firm and virile. "Medford's law: No romancing of the help or the clients." His tone left no doubt that he thought I was being stuffy.

Suspecting that he was partly right, I changed the subject. "Forget it. We've got other things to think about now."

"Right," he said, brightening. "Like this." He pointed to a photograph of Amy in the *News*. "What's she like?"

Amy obviously was too complicated a person to be sized up in one meeting, but I gave it a try anyway. "Vital statistics: age, around 30; height, about 5' 5" or 5' 6"; weight, maybe 125; bust, at least 36; hips, 38 or so; face, pretty. She's married to a former college athlete who now sells sporting goods. His name's Arthur Phillips. They have one son, ten years old, and they live in Laketon, Minnesota."

"Hey," Arthur interrupted. "What she like, personality-wise?" He'd found a paper clip which he was bending into the shape of a horseshoe.

"She's not what you'd expect of a housewife who's never been anywhere except in Indiana and Minnesota," I told him. "There's nothing diffident, or mousey about her. She's got a lot of bounce, a sense of humor, a firm backbone, and a temper. But what really got me was her candor, her lack of pretense and guile. She seems to have a kind of integrity you don't get much of around here. While I was with her I had the feeling that she was the most honest person I'd ever met. Of course, I don't know if it's true; but that's the way I felt."

The telephone rang, and Dora said Frankie Moline was on the line.

"Hello Lee baby." That was Frankie Moline. I hardly knew him and already I was "Lee baby."

"How are you Frankie?" I could be chummy too.

"Great, great." Frankie, I soon learned, had a way of say-

ing things twice, as if he suspected you weren't listening the first time.

"Lee baby," he bumbled, "I just got the news. Welcome aboard, welcome aboard. Working with you is going to be a real smash. Baby, I'm really delighted, delighted. I been after the old man for weeks to get me some help on this picture. It's going to be a lot easier with you helping me."

I got rid of him as soon as I could and then had Dora call Herb Gardner. I wanted to know what was going on, but I had to get in line because so did Herb Gardner, and, as the man who was picking up the check, he had the priority. That left me saying:

"Yes, Herb, I've seen the papers . . . Yes, it does look like hell, Herb . . . Of course you know all those photographs were taken before I got started on this thing, Herb . . . Yes, the interview took place before I got to the hotel . . . Well, I did have to stop and get dressed first since you got me out of bed . . . Yes, everything is under control now . . . She's in another hotel where the reporters won't find her . . . I'm keeping her out of sight for a couple of days . . . Yes, Herb . . . That's right, Herb . . ." Whew.

Finally, I managed to get in a word about the call from Frankie Moline.

"Is there something more I should know?" I asked. "Moline thinks he's still running the show. Who's the boss? Moline? Or me?"

"Well now, Lee, it's this way." Gardner's voice was soothing, like that of a mother talking to a child who's skinned his knee. "Frankie Moline doesn't work for me, and I can't control him." Herb was taking a line that was about 180 degrees away from the position he'd given me the last time we'd talked. "He's working for Foshay; you know that. And you'll have to work this out by yourself, Lee. You're a great diplomat, and that's why I got you into this deal. All you have to

do is to coordinate your efforts with Moline—only be sure it's *you* who does the coordinating."

I was still sitting there wondering how to go about coordinating someone like Frankie Moline when Dora said I had another call. It was George Schauffer, promotion manager for Owen Boice and Company, Amy's publisher. He just wanted to say "welcome aboard" and to tell me that he'd be glad to have me helping him with promotion of *HOME OF THE HEART*.

While I was reflecting on the suspicion that promotion of *HOME OF THE HEART* may have passed the saturation point, Dora popped in with her summary of the novel. She's a fast worker when she's in the mood.

"It's about this girl growing up in a small midwestern town," Dora explained. "She lives with her father and her aunt, whom she doesn't like—her mother died when the girl was a baby. She has a crush on an older boy whose family is the best in town, but he's a regular juvenile delinquent. Then, when she's sixteen, her father dies. He hadn't been well for some time, had bronchitis; and then his heart finally went bad. Sounds to me like a classic case of emphysema, which is what happens when the lungs' elastic gets stretched, permanently. Now..."

Dora went into a highly technical description that she must have picked up from a medical journal and stored away for use sometime when she didn't feel like repeating an old ailment, but I wasn't really listening. I was thinking about what Amy had told me of her childhood and what Dora had told me of the novel, and about how they matched up. That was it; Amy's novel was autobiographical. And I was getting an idea for the kind of promotion that would please both Herb Gardner and Albert Foshay. High class but splashy, it would be exactly what those two wanted.

"That's fine, Dora," I told her, "thanks very much."

"But I'm hardly started," she protested. I suppose the part

that hurt was that I hadn't let her finish her description of emphysema.

"It's enough for now," I said, "thank you very much."

Standing up, she sniffed, and I recognized the symptoms. It was a respiratory virus-type sniff that meant she wouldn't be able to make it in tomorrow and probably not the next day either. But right then I didn't care because I had this wonderful idea.

I called Walter Driscoll at *Focus* magazine and made a date with him for lunch at Sammy's. Walter was associate editor of *Focus*, and, since it was primarily a picture magazine, also its top writer. He and I did not particularly care for each other, but we had worked together on the *Dispatch*, had been fired together, and had spent our combined severance pay on a binge that had incapacitated half the staff for three days. So we had this old school tie that made it possible for us to endure each other, briefly, while swapping lies about how lucky we were to have escaped the *Dispatch*.

Finding Walter in the crowd that was three deep along the bar was easy because he's tall enough to be seen, and loud enough to be heard. And he has big teeth.

His are the kind of teeth a man needs if he's to hold his own at high noon in Sammy's midtown bar, or at any of the dozens of others uptown, downtown, or across town where everybody is doing business with somebody in a nearly solid wall of smiles, chuckles, grins, guffaws, and, occasionally, even an honest laugh. Face to face, eye to eye, tooth to tooth, it's the smile that is worthwhile. Everybody's happy and everybody's smiling in this noontime milieu of the incisor syndrome where nobody hears a discouraging word because nobody's listening and everybody's talking. Walter looked my way and motioned for me to join him in the ranks of glistening good fellowship, and as I edged toward him, for one queasy moment in that vast expanse of gleaming dentine, I caught the reflection of myself, a blurred but grinning

image of them all. The malaise was as fleeting as it was disturbing, and the vision vanished as I plunged through the martini-ringed looking glass to refuge beside Walter Driscoll, out of sight of myself.

"What have you been up to, Lee?" Walter grabbed my hand with both of his as if he feared I might try to slug him. His grip was so tight it hurt, but I knew how to handle that; I smiled.

That was the way Walter and I and all the toothy ones around us met life head-on; we smiled. If the stranger next to me knocked over my drink, I'd smile. If Walter turned down my project, I'd smile. So would he, and so would Herb Gardner when he told me I was fired. It was the code of the East: never get mad.

I was faithful to the code while Walter drank four double-martinis and reminded me how smart he was to get into the magazine business and how dumb I was for sliding into public relations, since the public relations man is no different from the press agent and everyone knows that press agents are the whores of the mass communications industry. I kept right on smiling, too, while he ordered the \$4.75 cut of roast beef, while he complained that it was tough, and while he asked for a bag so he could take the uneaten half of it home to his dog. And when the waiter charged me for two brandies we didn't have, I still smiled because by then Walter had agreed to my proposal that he and a photographer accompany Amy to her home town of Hawleyville, Indiana. The idea was to photograph her revisiting scenes of *HOME OF THE HEART*.

"Then you can write a piece about Amy's reaction to the old home town and the town's reaction to her," I told him.

It was a project that would make everyone happy if I could pull it off. *Focus* had an estimated thirty million readers and was well thought of; after all, not many of the thirty million knew Walter Driscoll.

Walter liked the idea. More than that, he loved it. Walter usually liked other people's ideas.

In a crafty, smirking way, Walter was smart. He had a firm grasp of the maxims and axioms, and he was aware that it's not whether you win or lose but how you play the game. Walter knew how to play the game.

The results often are less important than the manner in which they are attained. Walter knew, for example, that it is dangerous to initiate a project and then to execute it yourself. The reason, of course, is that in case of failure there's no fall guy, no one to finger with the blame, except yourself. Walter's way was safer. If he did have an idea, he saw to it that the actual work was done by someone else; and then if it flopped he could blame the execution. And he also knew the corollary rule: if you must work, do it only on other people's ideas. That way failure can be explained by pointing out it was a dumb idea to begin with. Walter always played it cautious. He wouldn't take a ride on a seesaw without a safety belt.

"If I knew Walter, as I thought I did, he would carry my proposal back to *Focus* in such a way that the boss would think that he himself had originated the idea. Then, if it worked out Walter would get the credit for doing a good job, and, on top of that, he would find a way to remind the boss that the idea really had been Walter's from the start. If it didn't work out, well, that's the way the ball bounces when you have a stupid boss. Walter would find a way to let him know that, too. Also the boss's boss.

By the time we were ready to leave Sammy's, Walter still was a little drunk from those double-martinis; I'm willing to concede him that. We were standing on the sidewalk saying good-bye when he brought it up, and to his credit, I will say that it seemed to embarrass him.

"Good-bye, Lee," he said, "I'll be in touch."

His glasses had slipped part way down his long, thin nose,

and he hadn't bothered to push them back where they belonged. In the days at the *Dispatch* we always could judge Walter's alcoholic content by how far his glasses had slipped. Half way down meant he was half drunk, and when they got to the tip he had been known to throw them away on the grounds that since he was blind there was no reason for him to wear glasses, not one, single, solitary reason. That day in front of Sammy's they were about a quarter of the way down.

"Good-bye Walter," I said, but before I could turn away he spoke quickly, pretending that at that very instant a thought had struck him.

But from the way he peered over his glasses and inspected the top of the Empire State Building as if he'd never seen it before I could tell that he'd done a lot of thinking before he asked, "You still single, Lee?"

"Yes." For a moment I had a sinking suspicion that he wanted to introduce me to an old maid sister.

"Well," he said, lifting his eyes to the tip of the Empire State's television tower, "I was just thinking about how well you used to make out with the broads around the *Dispatch*. Boy, you had the fattest address book I ever saw."

He hesitated, but I didn't say anything, letting him stumble on.

"You know, ah . . ." He cleared his throat. "I was wondering if, with that excess supply you must have, you might sort of, well, you know, ah, fix me up. You know, with one of 'em. Maybe one of your, ah, rejects."

He laughed nervously and sneaked a glance to see how I was taking it.

"Well now . . ." Walter had struck a responsive cord and at that moment he seemed like a friend in need; he was talking my language. I was thinking of telling him I'd introduce him to a young actress who lived just around the corner and who was out of work most of the time because they don't

allow that kind of acting on Broadway. Except Walter had to prove he doesn't know when to stop talking.

"You know, Lee," he said, with a new tone of authority, "we'll probably be seeing more of each other if I can bring off this Indiana thing, and I just thought . . ."

He hesitated, and I knew what he thought. And I was tempted to say what I thought of him for thinking it.

"Sorry, Walter," I said, shaking my head. "They've all gotten away from me, and I don't even have an address book any more."

So much for him and his thirty million readers. I wasn't a pimp, and Walter didn't know as much about press agents as he thought he did.

"Good-bye Lee." Walter was anxious to get away.

"So long." I turned and walked a half dozen steps or so before he called out.

"Oh Lee," he said, "don't worry about that Indiana thing; I'm sure I can put it over."

That was Walter too. He needed a good idea more than an acting lesson.

By the time I got back to the office I was feeling better, so good that when Dora asked me if I was ready to hear the rest of her résumé of *HOME OF THE HEART* I could tell her no without making excuses or caring about the consequences. Her answer was a sneeze that meant she was finished for the rest of the week, even if she were able to last out the day. But who cared?

In one play I'd made first down on the one-yard line, and I called Herb Gardner to tell him so. He was delighted. So was Albert Foshay when I called him, and while I was wondering if I should tell Frankie Moline he phoned me. He wanted to know what I had done with Amy Neal.

"She's not at the Plaza," he said.

"Is that so?" I played it dumb.

"All right, Lee baby," he said, "you can tell me. Where's she, where's she?"

I said I didn't know, and in the hope of sidetracking him I told him about the *Focus* magazine project.

"Well how about that," he said. "I've been thinking of the same thing for some time, some time. But I didn't want to take Amy out of New York just yet, not just yet. Not while she's the hottest property in town. You know how it is, a week out of town and everyone forgets you're alive. But since you've already made the arrangements I guess it won't hurt anything much to have her out of circulation a day or two, just a day or two. When are *we* going?"

I told him I'd let him know, and even before I hung up I was trying to think of a way to get Amy to Hawleyville without having Moline tag along. I was still thinking when the phone rang.

It was George Schaffer, and he wanted to know what I had done with Amy.

"She's scheduled to be on a radio show at eight o'clock," he said. "She's got to be there."

Amy hadn't mentioned her schedule for the next few days, and I hadn't thought to ask. To calm Schaffer down, I said I'd have Amy at the studio in plenty of time, and I told him about the Hawleyville plan, which turned out to be *exactly* what he had been thinking of working out for some time. But he had been holding off on it until Amy had completed other promotional ventures he had lined up. So he said.

"As long as you've made the arrangements," he added, "I guess it won't hurt anything much to go through with it."

Schaffer volunteered to go to Hawleyville with us, and I said that was very nice of him. I also got rid of him as quickly as possible because I wanted to go to Amy's hotel and break the news about the *Focus* project. On the way, I decided this event was worth a small celebration, and I stopped at a liquor store. Not knowing what she preferred, I bought a

fifth of Scotch, a quart of bourbon, and a fifth of gin. While I was waiting for a taxi, the thought struck me that perhaps she didn't drink at all, and to cover that contingency I went into a candy store and bought a big box of chocolates. They had these big fruit baskets in that store, too, and I bought one, just in case she was on a diet. At a bookstore I picked up a couple of novels that might help pass the time while she waited for things to quiet down.

By the time I got to Amy's hotel I was as overburdened as Santa Claus and feeling as generous as the Ford Foundation. The doorman had to help me get all the stuff into the lobby, and he had to help me get it out again after I found that Amy wasn't there. She had checked out.

I wasn't too worried, not right then, because it seemed likely that she had decided to go back to the Plaza. My hunch proved to be right. She had gone to the Plaza, but by the time I got there she also had packed up, signed the bill, and left. With no forwarding address.

I called the office, but Dora had gone home to catch cold and Lars Johnston said he knew of no calls from Amy.

Back at the apartment, I gave the candy to the doorman and the books to the elevator operator. The fruit I could eat, and the way things were going it looked as if I would need the liquor. All the elation I had felt over the deal with Walter Driscoll had seeped away, and I suddenly remembered that I hadn't slept for nearly thirty-six hours. I tried phoning Amy's home in Laketon, but the housekeeper said Amy was in New York. I tried checking the airlines that fly to Minneapolis and St. Paul, without success, and calls to several hotels produced no results either.

If ever there was a time for careful thinking, this was it, and I sat down in the living room with an apple from Amy's basket in one hand and her bottle of Scotch in the other. Then I tried thinking. But it was no good because all I could think of was what Herb Gardner, Albert Foshay, Frankie

Moline, and George Schauffer would say if they knew that on the very first day I had misplaced their lady novelist. The way things developed, I found out sooner than I had expected.

When the phone began ringing I woke up and, for a moment, I had that weird lost feeling of not knowing where I was. It was dark by then, and in jumping out of the chair I tripped over the fruit basket and bumped my shin on the coffee table before I staggered to the phone without even trying to find the light switch.

"Well, what have you been doing?" It was Herb Gardner's voice, but I was so groggy that I thought he merely was remarking on the length of time it took me to answer the phone.

"Sorry, Herb," I yawned. "I was asleep."

"Asleep!" Herb was a nice fellow, but excitable.

"Yeah, just dozed off for a minute."

"Lee," he said, "you must have been asleep all day. Don't you know what has happened?"

"We gone to war with Russia?" I wasn't kidding; I was still half asleep.

"Now listen, Lee, don't be a wise guy."

He started to continue telling me what he thought of smart alecks, but I cut in. "Herb, I haven't the faintest idea of what you're talking about."

"Oh," he said, "you haven't seen the first editions of the morning papers?"

"No."

"Well brace yourself. On the front pages there is a photograph of Amy Neal. She is standing at the door of an airplane waving *good-bye*. She is going back to Minnesota—and I quote—'I won't be back. I've had it.' Now are you awake, Lee?"

I was awake but wishing I were dreaming. Amy had left town without a word to me, and a hard knot in the pit of my

stomach made me wince as I wondered if I had given her the idea by suggesting she go into seclusion. Wait until Herb Gardner found that out. "Did she say anything else?"

"Yes," he said, "but that's the worst of it. The gist of it is that after her brush with the Sultan she decided that she's had enough of Manhattan."

"I'm sorry, Herb." And I was too. "I thought I had her stashed away in a hotel where she could avoid reporters until this El Morocco business blew over. She never gave me the slightest hint that she was thinking of running out."

"Okay." Some of the bite had gone out of his voice. "But she can't cut out of the promotion of HOME OF THE HEART entirely. I hoped you would get her out of the saloon society orbit that Moline had put her in, but I didn't expect her to become a hermit. You've got to get her back here."

The knot in my stomach began to loosen; I still had a chance to regain the lost ground, and my confidence was creeping back. "Yes, Herb . . . I know it, Herb . . . Nothing to worry about, Herb . . . She'll be back . . . don't worry."

As soon as I could get away from the telephone I found the light switch. Also the bottle of Scotch, but before I could pour a drink the phone rang again.

It was Frankie Moline.

"Yes, Frankie . . ." The words were different, but it was the same tune. "I'll take care of it . . . Yes, I understand . . . Of course . . . don't worry."

I decided I didn't want a drink after all, but before I could get the bottle put away in the liquor cabinet the phone rang again.

George Schaffer had seen the papers.

"I know it, George . . . No, it wasn't my idea that she leave . . . I'll do all I can . . . don't worry."

What I really wanted was a strong cup of coffee, but before I could make it the phone was at it again.

"Oh yes, Mr. Foshay . . . That's right, Mr. Foshay . . . Of

course I hardly know her . . . Yes, I understand . . . Only this morning I met her for the first time, you know . . . Yes, I am sorry . . . don't worry . . . Yes, Mr. Foshay, I'm going to Lake-ton right away."

I put down the phone, muttering to myself. "But first there's one thing I have to know: where is it?"

Chapter 3

AMY NEAL?" The attendant at the gas station studied the toes of his shoes, surveyed the heavens, scratched his ear, and said, "Never heard of her."

So here I was in the home town of the nation's most famous lady author, and I was being asked, "What was that name again?"

Getting to Laketon had been so easy too. A jet had delivered me to the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport in no time, and the drive in a rented car had taken less than 30 minutes.

"Neal," I repeated, "Amy Neal."

He was a chunky man with greying hair and an earnest expression, and he had the first gas station inside the town; I would have expected him to know everyone. And I guess I had half expected to see a sign saying, "Welcome to Laketon, Home of Amy Neal."

But there was no sign, and the best the gas station man could do was to hold up a hand for silence and say, "Let me

think." Some of his front teeth were missing, so that his upper lip partly covered the lower one. He chewed on the lip, slapped the top of the car, and mumbled, "Neal, Neal," but none of it did any good. He still didn't know her.

"Must be new here." It embarrassed him to be asked a question he couldn't answer. "You know how it is these days; they come and they go and you can't keep track of everybody. Since the war we've become one of these bedroom towns for folks that work in Minneapolis; fellows drive back and forth every day—must take 'em forty minutes each way. Now me, I live over in that little yellow house." He pointed to a bungalow behind the gas station. "Now when lunch is ready Claire just comes out on the back porch and calls and I..."

"Phillips," I said. "That's it." I didn't mean to be rude but I suppose I was. "Mrs. Arthur Phillips. Do you know her?"

"Oh, Mrs. Phillips, of course." He looked relieved. "Buys her gas here. Got a new red Cadillac. But I never heard of Amy Neal."

"It's the same person," I said. "That's her maiden name, the one she used on her book."

"Book?" He was getting that blank look again.

"Sure," I said. "Didn't you know she's written a best seller?"

"A book?" He chewed his lip for a moment. "Yeah, I did hear something about that. A book about the heart. She's so young and pretty I didn't even know she was a doctor. Guess I ought to read it account I get these pains in my chest sometimes, and Claire says I ought to go down to Mayos for a checkup."

"It's not a medical book." I interrupted him again. "It's a novel, and all it has to do with the heart is the title—**HOME OF THE HEART.**"

I probably was unnecessarily sharp with him, but Amy deserved better than this in her own town.

"Oh," he said, unabashed by his ignorance, "a made up story."

"That's right; strictly fiction."

"I'd kind of like to read it some time." He studied me closely. "You got any idea where I could borrow a copy?"

"Since she's a customer of yours, why not *buy* one?"

He shook his head to show what he thought of that crazy idea. "Must be expensive. Can I get a paperback?"

"Not for another year or so."

"I'll wait." He was definite about it.

Before he could give me directions a customer drove in, and while I waited I wondered if others in Laketon knew that Amy had written a book and if they did how many of them thought it was a medical treatise.

When the other car left he came back to me, wiping his hands on an oily rag.

"How do I get to the Phillips house?" I asked before he could sidetrack me again.

"Well," he said slowly, "they live over in poet's corner."

"Huh?"

"Poet's corner." Only he pronounced it "poo-ats."

"You know, Chaucer and all them guys. Streets all named for poets. The Phillips live on Keats Road, just beyond Longfellow Drive. You go to the first stop light and turn left. Then you go two blocks past the school on your right and turn left on Poe Lane which you follow until you come to Kipling Way which goes kind of around to the right and after a while it splits off, and you take the left fork until you come to Keats Road. It's right along there."

He looked proud, but I was lost, and I hadn't even started.

"Thanks," I said, pushing the gas pedal a little so that maybe he'd quit leaning on the car and let me go. But he wasn't through yet.

"It's all new down there. Used to be sort of a swamp until

a developer took it over." He straightened up, and I thought I was going to be able to make a getaway, but he stopped me by putting his hand on the window frame. "You a friend of Mrs. Phillips?"

"Business associate," I said, wondering if he was trying to keep me there until the gas tank ran dry.

"Books?"

"No, movies."

"Oh." He took his hand away, and I eased the car into gear, but before I had gone three feet he called, "Hey."

I slammed on the brakes, and he moved closer, peering at me through the car window. "You wouldn't be Rock Hudson?"

"No," I laughed, "I would be if I could, but I'm not."

"I didn't suppose you was, but I just thought I'd ask," he said.

"Thanks," I said, and as I pulled into the street I got a glimpse of myself in the rear view mirror. Perhaps that fellow was ignorant, but he wasn't stupid.

Or at least less stupid than I was, because by the time I had gone by the school I couldn't remember whether I was to turn right or left on Poe Lane, and I took a chance on right. As I passed Byron Circle and Whitman Trail, I reflected on the suburbanite's distaste for living on a "street." I knew a fellow who had a beautiful suburban home with wide lawns and fine neighbors, but he wasn't happy there for no other reason than that his address was "410 Third Street." He kept looking around until he found another house on Old Gunsmith Road. It's smaller, and there's water in the basement after every rain, but he's happy. Especially since he has no house number at all now.

While contemplating the American preference for roads, lanes, drives, and trails, as opposed to streets, I drove straight into a dead end at Tennyson Circle. I turned around, but by now I was hopelessly lost in the maze of the bards with

Hawthorne cutting across Emerson, Thoreau bisecting Browning, and Shelley veering away from Byron.

Soon I found myself on Edgar Guest Crossway with the suspicion that I was on the fringe of the poet's corner, if not already out of it. Looking for help, I stopped at the corner where a woman was raking the winter's leaves out of her flower bed.

"Phillips?" She looked doubtful.

"Possibly," I suggested, "you know her as Amy Neal."

She brightened. "You mean the writer?"

She knew all about Amy and said that if I kept turning to the right I couldn't miss it.

I could have, but when I got there the first person I saw was Amy, and right away I noticed she'd had her hair style changed to get rid of the slinky effect that she had said made her look like a call girl. Her hair was cut shorter and waved into sort of a pompadour that made her seem younger. And my impression was that she was acting younger too, about twenty-five years younger. Her back was to me so that she didn't see me drive up, and if she had she probably wouldn't have paid any attention because she was too engrossed in whatever it was she was doing. She was standing in a semi-crouch, expectantly, like a third baseman; in her right hand was a rolled-up umbrella that she gripped like a rapier with the crook handle away from her; and in her left hand she held a cookie. She was saying:

"All right, Bee-Jo, that's enough. Come get the cookie. Good Bee-Jo."

Opposite her, about fifteen feet away, stood an enormous black poodle, laughing at her.

"Come, Bee-Jo," she pleaded.

"Arf," replied Bee-Jo, jumping sideways, wagging his tail, and then sitting down to laugh some more.

As I got out of the car and walked toward Amy she still didn't hear me, and her stance made her stern an almost ir-

resistible target, leading me to speculate on how she might react to a friendly swat, until Bee-Jo snapped me back to reality. With a snarl, he abandoned the game with Amy and charged, a growling black streak with white fangs. Racing past Amy, he leaped for me, but I was ready because at one time during my whirl at marriage I, too, had been the joint owner of a gigantic black poodle whose behavior had contributed, in a small way, to my marital ruin.

As every unscarred poodle owner knows, the best defense is to give him the knee in the middle of the chest when he dives for you. That's what I gave Bee-Jo, who flipped over and landed on his back with a thud. While he was thrashing around on the ground, trying to regain his feet, and his breath, Amy reached him, and with a lightning thrust of the umbrella, hooked his collar. She hauled him in, and when he tried to break away she slapped him sharply across the nose. That took the fight out of him.

"Oh, it's you," she said, looking at me for the first time. If she noticed any resemblance to Rock Hudson, she didn't mention it.

"Lovely dog," I said.

"Yes, isn't he," she said, whacking him across the nose again as he tried to jerk free. "Excuse me a moment while I put him in solitary."

While she led the dog into the house, I had a chance to take stock. The house was pretty ordinary, a Cape Cod with perhaps six rooms. It was painted white with dark green shutters, and there was a screened breezeway between it and the one-car garage. In the driveway stood the Cadillac. It was a convertible; it was big; and it was shiny red. From what I'd seen this was hardly a Cadillac neighborhood, with the choice running more to Fords and Chevrolets. And maybe a Pontiac or a Mercury here and there.

I was wondering if the neighbors might feel Amy was splashing it on a little too thick with her choice of a new car,

but as I watched Amy come out of the house I knew she wouldn't care. She walked with an easy grace, swinging her arms and hips with saucy determination, as if she expected a row and welcomed it. She was wearing the suburban matron's uniform of tweed skirt and short-sleeved white blouse, and on her it looked good.

"Holy Moley!" she said, wiping her brow with the back of her hand. "What a workout."

As we shook hands, she said, "I didn't expect you so soon. You've come to take me back to New York?"

I nodded.

"You have a warrant from the Book-of-the-Month Club?"

"I think I can convince you without one," I said, laughing. As I said, I can laugh with the best of them.

She shrugged. "Come around in back for a minute, will you? I was hanging out the wash when the dog got loose."

Her voice was pleasant, softly musical, but I noticed she said "warsh" for wash, and I guessed that was part of her Indiana heritage.

As we walked around the house I could spot the spoor of a small boy—a bicycle beside the driveway, a broken baseball bat under a bush, an old tennis ball on the lawn, and the shreds of a kite caught in the top of a tree. I stumbled and nearly fell when I stepped on a large bone that had been left in the path.

"What's the dog's name?" I asked. "Sounded as if you were calling him Bee-Jo."

"I was. Since he's a French poodle, we decided to name him Bijou, but to our son he's always been Bee-Jo, and so we let it go at that."

She looked at me curiously. "That was a pretty deft maneuver, the way you upset him. Where'd you learn that?"

"I used to be married to a poodle owner," I said. "That was one of the things wrong with me—I was smarter than the dog."

It was a dumb thing to say, and right away I regretted it because now she'd be asking me questions like how long was I married, why was it I hadn't married again, and all the silly stuff that women always ask the ones who got away. But she only looked at me speculatively, and said nothing. Nothing at all until we rounded the corner of the house and walked over to the clothes line, which was one of those things that look like the ribs of a beach umbrella, and then she asked, "How were you on hanging up wet sheets?"

"I don't know; I never tried."

"Here." She handed me a corner of a sheet from the basket. "Help me put it over the first line there."

It wasn't as easy as it looked, and by the time it was draped over the line Amy was on one side, and I was on the other. "Put some pins on there to hold it, will you please?" she asked. "What happens when I don't go back to New York?"

"Then I guess I stay here," I told her.

"Here?" I'd surprised her that time. "Why?"

"Because I was hired to look after your public relations, and if I can't do it in New York, then I'll have to do it here." I went around the sheet where I could see her. She was hanging up a boy's baseball suit.

"So now you're going to do something for my image," she said. "Frankie Moline and George Schauffer are always talking about my image—as if I'm something concocted out of their imagination."

She pointed to the clothes basket, and I handed her the underwear as I began to explain my concept of public relations. "I can't give you an image," I said. "All I can do is to help you project your own. Anyone who tells you he can do more than that is trying to deceive you, and others, including himself."

These remarks were tried and true, part of what Lars

Johnston called "the honesty bit." I sometimes put myself to sleep by reciting them.

In a measure, they *were* honest because I had put my trust in them. The reason I believed in them was that the self-effacing public relations man who disclaimed miracles and who began by talking about what he could not do was just enough of an odd-ball to be attractive to those in need of counseling, including Herb Gardner. They admired the open-handed approach, and I preferred it too, although I knew that what I was offering was a sort of dishonest honesty. It was the truth, but not the whole truth, and I valued it because it was the key to the next and more important phase of my creed.

As Amy finished hanging up the wash, I moved toward this vital second stage.

"Why don't we sit down over there?" I suggested, pointing to the bench of a picnic table. It was not spring yet in Minnesota, but the afternoon sun was pleasantly warm, and we would be out of the wind.

After I had given her a cigarette and lighted it, I sat back and waited for her to pick up where I had left off, and she came straight along the path I had opened for her.

"But if you can't create an image for me, what can you do?"

"A great deal." That's what they always asked, and I always was delighted to explain the functions of my profession. "The only image I can give you is the one you create yourself; if by your own actions you create an impression that the public doesn't approve of, then there's nothing I can do to change it. But—" here I paused to build up the emphasis—"I can give you guidance on what to expect from public opinion and I can prepare you for the social forces you will be encountering."

"I see." Amy nodded with understanding. "No hocus-pocus, no abracadabra; just the facts."

"That's right." I was pleased to find her so perceptive.

"In other words," she said while smoothing her skirt, "you merely emphasize and make the most of a client's good points. Your relation to a client is something like that of a beautician to her patron; you emphasize the strong points, try to make the overall effect pleasing. Is that it?"

"Well, yes, that's about it." I should have been on guard, but right then I found myself wondering where the Sultan had pinched her and also speculating on several choice locations.

"And, like the beautician, you sort of cover up the blemishes—a little more powder here, a bit of eye shadow there, a touch of rouge where it's needed . . . that kind of thing. You seek to draw attention away from any natural defects. Right?"

"Well . . ." Now I knew I should have been studying her mind instead of her matter; her expression was earnest enough, but her eyes were bright with laughter. "No, that's different."

She shook her head and said: "Strictly taradiddle."

"Strictly what?"

"Taradiddle." She said it slowly in a tone honed by a suspicion I wasn't quite bright. "You know—a fib."

"Oh," I nodded knowingly. "A white lie."

"No, not exactly." She was being patient with me. "A taradiddle is in between a white lie and a dirty lie."

"Such as?" I still wasn't with her.

"Well." She massaged the edge of her scalp while she thought about it. "It's like this. If you told a homely girl she looked lovely and your only motive was to feed her ego, make her feel better, then that would be a white lie. If you said the same thing, hoping to get her to buy your brand of soap instead of another, that would be a taradiddle. But if you told her that with the idea it might make it possible for you to, ah, take advantage of her—that would be a dirty lie."

"I wouldn't know. I don't tell lies to girls."

Saying it that way must have made me sound pretty self-satisfied, because she said, "No," and there was an edge on her voice I hadn't noticed before. "You never have had to, I'm sure."

"Oh, I don't know." It seemed important right then to prove I was just as big a liar as the next fellow. "Why not?"

"As if you didn't know." Every time she smiled her eyes got bigger and rounder. "When a man is tall and handsome and has a square chin with a dimple in it, he doesn't even *know* any homely girls, only beautiful ones."

"Chin?" I found myself rubbing it.

"Yes, you have the chin, the irresistible kind—square enough to assure virility but just enough of a dimple to hint at some inner yearning for affection. It's the kind of chin that can bring out the worst and the best in a woman, all at the same time."

"Taradiddle." My laugh was uncomfortably defensive. "And where did you ever pick up a word like that?"

"Around home it was just there," she said. "It was my father's expression for everything that was humbug or malarkey. My aunt's gossip, Roosevelt's speeches, the minister's sermons, most of what he read in the newspapers, the magazine ads, all those inspirational books—you know, like 'How to Be Happy With Your Ulcer'—and all the excuses people had for not paying the bills he sent them. All taradiddle."

"Your father must have been an astute fellow," I said, and now I was glad she had mentioned him because that gave me a chance to lead into the old days at Hawleyville and to get around to the *Focus* magazine project that would take her back there.

"Oh, no." She reacted like a burning firecracker. "Not on your life." She jumped up and held out her hands with her palms toward me in a way that meant keep away from me

with that crazy idea. "When I left there, I left for good, forever. And I'm not going back. Not for *Focus* magazine, not for Foshay Productions, not for Owen Boice and Company, not for you. And not even for myself."

A mixture of irritation, weariness, and disappointment bubbled up in me and nearly boiled over, but with an effort I smiled and said, in a tone that was meant to be soothing, "You don't have to make the decision right now. Take a while and think it over."

She came back and sat down before she said: "All right, I've thought it over. The answer is, no!"

Frowning, she flipped her cigarette toward a trash can and looked at her watch. "I've got to get Randy from school." She stood up. "Why don't you go inside and fix yourself a drink? The makings are in the cupboard in the kitchen, farthest one to the right." Then she was gone.

Nuts to her and nuts to her liquor, I thought. The way things were going I might just as well sit where I was and rot. Anyway, I wasn't keen about a return bout with Bee-Jo who probably was lurking inside, waiting for a chance to even the score.

Sulking, I stayed there for maybe two or three minutes until the sun went under a cloud, forcing me to make the choice between possible dog bite and certain frost bite. I went in the front door cautiously, calling "Here Bee-Jo, good Bee-Jo." I had no intention of being ambushed.

But by the time I had crossed the hall I could hear him growling and barking in the basement and scratching at the door. Feeling braver, I went into the living room, to the right of the center hall. It was furnished with a mixture of Early American hand-me-downs and modern that somehow seemed to complement each other in an indication of Amy's good taste.

The wall opposite the entrance hall was all shelves, except

for a fireplace in the middle. The shelves on the right held nothing but trophies—gold and silver, large and small—all recently polished.

To the left, the shelves were crammed with books.

"His and Hers," I muttered, going over for a closer look.

I picked up a cup from the trophy side and read the inscription, "Green Acres Country Club Golf Championship, 1959." Beside it stood a golden figure of a golfer on a pedestal which was inscribed, "Green Acres Country Club Golf Championship, 1960." A silver cup revealed that Arthur had slipped to runner-up in 1961, which must have been a rough year around the Phillips house, but an engraved plaque next in line confirmed his return to championship form in '62. On the shelf above the golf trophies I found a framed certificate affirming that in 1951 Arthur Phillips had been elected to the United Press All-America basketball team.

The trophies were too numerous to be inspected one by one, but a random sampling turned up "Hurdles Championship, 1949," which, surprisingly, was smaller than "Nokomis Alley Bowling Championship, 1956." There was a figurine for "Y.M.C.A. Intermediate Handball Champion, 1945" and another for "Intramural Volleyball Championship, 1949." He had won the "Gopher Athletic Club Squash Championship" in 1957, and I was willing to bet that he was a hell of a horse-shoe pitcher, too, but by then I was getting bored with trophy-viewing, and I crossed over to see what Amy was reading.

Inspecting the titles, I felt a little sneaky, as if I were snooping in Amy's personal things, prying into her psyche. I found Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* and *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*. There were works by Balzac, several novels by Sinclair Lewis, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, James T. Farrell's *My Days of Anger*, Turgenev's *The Torrents of Spring*, and *Adventures of a Young Man* by John

Dos Passos. Also, among dozens of others, *How To Write Novels That Sell*. That one Amy must have learned by heart, but I had the feeling that among all those books something was missing, and I was still trying to think what it could be when the doorbell rang.

I opened the door and there, looking almost as surprised as I was, stood Frankie Moline.

He recovered first. "Lee baby," he cried, "Lee baby." He grabbed my hand. "Am I glad to see you. I tried and tried to call you so we could come out together. Man this is great."

"Yeah," I said, "real tickety-boo."

He pushed past me and marched into the living room. "Where's Amy?" he asked.

"She's gone to pick up her kid." I sat down in the only comfortable-looking chair and lighted a cigarette. "If you want a drink, the stuff's in the kitchen, right-hand cupboard." I might as well let him think I had an established beachhead.

If I scored, Frankie Moline didn't let it show. He was an expert in concealing all emotions but one, greed. He could be suave, polished, urbane, and even charming. But the eyes gave him away, revealed the secret he never could hide—that he always would be what he was, a grasper. The eyes were too dark, too wise, too calculating, always counting the house, estimating the price, searching for the gimmick, undressing the best-looking woman in the room. And there always was a little too much of him.

He had the kind of a mouth that smiles well, wide, with big, white teeth, but the teeth were so even and so highly polished that the first time I saw him I had wondered if they were his own. His nose was perfect. But was it bobbed? He looked young, about my age in the early or middle thirties, but the crows feet at the corners of his eyes belonged to an older man.

Sauntering over to the trophy shelves, he moved with an

easy, athletic grace, as if he were a boxer turned tap dancer. He picked up a cup and read the inscription aloud, "Metropolitan Hole-In-One Contest, Runnerup, 1958."

"Christ," he muttered, "I wonder if all these mugs would hold the liniment it took to win 'em. Christ."

With a shrug that showed what he thought of the Phillips' collection, he turned, straightening his tie that was as much a part of him as the winter's Miami Beach tan, and yet, somehow, neither quite belonged on him. Both had been acquired at great expense, and he might as well have worn the price tag. His suit fit him admirably, and the only thing wrong with it was that it not only was expensive but it also *looked* expensive. And those alligator shoes are worn only by people who want you to ask what they cost.

Frankie obviously wanted to be asked, just as he wanted to be important and wanted to be the boss. And there I was sitting in Amy's living room ahead of him and telling him where he could find the liquor. He didn't like it.

So, having made my point, I could afford to ease up a little. "Good-looking shoes," I said, "very neat."

He grinned, part way; it was about an eight-tooth smile. "Sweet hey? Sweet. I got a good price, too, account a fellow I know has a shoe store." Frankie, I was sure, would live naked in a cave on nuts and berries before he would pay the retail price for anything.

"I can get you a discount if you want me to call this guy," Frankie said. He leaned an elbow on the fireplace mantel, and right away he seemed more at home; or maybe it just looked that way to me because the only times I could remember seeing him before he had been leaning on the bar at Shor's, at Sardi's, or some such. "I've got discounts on these shoes for a lot of my friends," he added.

So now we were friends. "Thanks," I said, "I'll call you when we get back to the city."

His smile was wider; about ten teeth this time. Frankie loved to have people indebted to him.

"Lee baby," he said, "we're going to make a real pair on this promotion down there in Iowa."

"Indiana," I corrected him, having decided not to tell him that Amy wanted no part of the deal.

"Indiana, Iowa." He shrugged. "What's the diff; it's all Bridgeport. Anyway, I got some ideas on how to make this deal really sing, so that Foshay Productions will get equal billing with Amy in the article."

"Well..." I was saved from trying to explain why I thought Foshay Productions should *not* get equal billing when Frankie resumed the description of his concept of an Indiana idyl, Hollywood style.

"We've got going this contest for selecting a couple of unknowns to play the leading male and female roles in *HOME OF THE HEART*. So it's working out just right; we'll have the contest finals down there in Iowa, or wherever, and in addition to the regional winners we'll invite anyone who wants to try out and hasn't had a chance to be auditioned locally. That way we get the auditions in *Focus* too. The local papers have been eating it up. Now down in this place—where is it, Iowa or Indiana—we can..." He stopped because the phone was ringing.

"Better not answer," Moline said, "it might be her husband."

Ignoring him, I picked up the phone.

"This is the post office," a woman said, "will you please come down and pick up your mail?"

"Why don't you just send it over?" I asked.

"Now you know the man can't carry all this stuff." She spoke with more asperity than the situation seemed to warrant. "That's why Mrs. Phillips rented a box for mail addressed to Amy Neal. But it's been full for days, and the letters are piling up all over the place."

"I'll tell her," I said. "Thank you for calling."

As I hung up, Amy opened the front door and came in with a slender boy who was all freckles and hair.

"Mr. Medford," Amy said, "this is my son, Randolph."

"How do you do, Mr. Medford." The boy gave me a shy smile, and I liked him because he didn't offer me a man-to-man handshake, the way some kids do.

Moline strolled out of the living room. "Hi Amy," he said, "Hi."

"Hello." If Amy was surprised, she concealed it. "Randy, this is Mr. Moline."

"Hi Randy," said Moline, offering him a handshake that Randy accepted suspiciously, as if he expected it to hurt.

Amy gave him a pat on the head and said, "Freddy said he'd wait for you at his house. Remember?"

"Bye," said the boy, taking off as if he were escaping from Sing Sing.

As soon as he was gone, Amy turned on Moline. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Amy baby," Moline said, taking a shuffling, precautionary step to the rear, "I came to explain."

He was still explaining in the living room, and I was waiting in the hall where I wouldn't get caught in the cross fire when the phone rang again. I answered, and this time it was a man who wanted to talk to Amy.

"She's busy right now." I wouldn't have interrupted the dressing down that Amy was giving Moline for anything. "Can I help you?"

"Maybe you can." It was the cracked voice of an old man. "I want her to write my autobiography."

"Autobiography?"

"Yeah. You see I've led a very interesting life, and everybody says that if I wrote it down I'd make a fortune. And I thought if I could just sort of tell it to Amy Neal she could

write it all down, and then I'd have enough money to move out of the home. I don't like it here, too many old people. Now I thought . . ."

"Thanks very much for calling," I said, "I'll tell her about it." I was in a hurry to hang up because I could hear enough from the living room to tell that Amy had Moline crawling, and that I didn't want to miss. But the old man was persistent.

"You know I've had a very interesting life, making duck callers."

"Duck callers?" I could have slit my throat for asking.

"Yes, hand carved. The tune was . . ."

I cut him off by saying Amy would call him back and hung up before he could remember he hadn't given me his name.

By the time I got off the phone Amy's voice was beginning to soften, a great disappointment. I had hoped to see her chasing Moline half way to Minneapolis, but now she was saying, "All right, I suppose it wasn't your fault."

Except for certain inhibitions, I would have yelled, "The hell it wasn't," but anyway right then the doorbell rang, and in my new role of telephone answerer and general busybody I went to the door.

On the step stood a round man with a wide, flat nose, baggy eyes, and sagging jowls that gave him the air of an amiable bulldog. He had sandy, crew cut hair that seemed to be the same color and texture as his tweed suit. Although he obviously had arrived in the car sitting at the curb, he was puffing as if he had run a long way.

"Amy here?" he wheezed.

"Hello George," said Amy from behind me.

I stepped aside, and George waddled in, moving sideways as if he feared the door wouldn't be wide enough for him.

"This is George Schauffer," Amy said, and we shook hands. He was the promotion manager of Owen Boice and Com-

pany who had accused me of spiriting Amy away so that she would miss her television and radio appearances.

"Glad know ya," he puffed, holding out a hand that was soft as a pillow. He was around fifty, and he obviously had been limiting his exercise to short sprints from the bar to the dinner table.

We all went into the living room, and while we were waiting for George either to catch his breath or collapse the door bell rang. Amy opened the door, and before she could close it again the population of the Phillips household had been increased by three insurance men. Retreating a step at a time, Amy kept insisting, "I don't have time to talk about it now." But the three of them did, and as far as they were concerned that was all that mattered. The big one in the middle did most of the talking with the other two nodding, and smiling, and seconding the motion every little while. To a man they were interested in Amy's future, and they had almost maneuvered their way into the living room when they suddenly discovered their own future was much more important. They were meeting Bee-Jo, informally. The poodle somehow had forced open the basement door, and in a black blur of growling, barking, and snapping he went for all three insurance men at once.

One of the salesmen cowered behind the brief case he had hoisted in front of his face in a frantic effort to protect the jugular vein; another whimpered, "Down doggie, nice doggie" in the most pitiful gesture of appeasement since Munich; and the third jerked open the door to flee. The crack of daylight beside the door was all that Bee-Jo needed, and he made for freedom, whipping past the cowering agents, and racing across the lawn and down the street.

"He's running away," Amy shouted, following Bee-Jo out the door. "Help me catch him."

She ran across the lawn, followed by the insurance men at

a pace indicating they would as soon catch the Asian Flu as Bee-Jo. Moline joined the chase, and Schauffer went wheezing after him. I decided one bout with Bee-Jo was enough for the day; and I couldn't have run if I'd tried. I was laughing too hard.

Anyway, somebody had to answer the telephone. This time it was a salesman for a mutual stock firm who wanted to know when it would be convenient to drop around and talk to Amy about her future.

"Anytime after we catch the dog," I said and hung up, leaving him something to chew on.

The phone rang again immediately, and it was the professor of creative writing at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. He wanted to invite Amy to lecture there, for a fee. By the time I had promised she'd let him know the door bell was ringing again.

"Oh, is Amy here?" The caller was a young woman in a house dress with her hair in curlers.

"She's out chasing the dog."

"That dog," the woman said, starting to fluff up her hair and then remembering the curlers. "The whole family is forever chasing him all over the neighborhood. I guess that's their hobby; gives them a sense of togetherness. Also lots of fresh air and exercise."

"Is he vicious?" I asked.

"Oh no, not Bee-Jo. He's a vegetarian. His idea of a big time is chewing up every flower bed in the neighborhood."

She grinned. "I'm Martha Dibble from next door."

After having forced me to identify myself, she asked, "You a friend of the Phillips?"

"Business associate of Amy's."

"Books?"

"Movies."

"Say," she said, inspecting me more closely, "you wouldn't

be . . . No, no, of course not. That's silly . . . What I came over for was to borrow some coffee. Could I just come in and help myself? I know where it is."

I followed her into the kitchen, and she went straight to the coffee can. After she had taken a cup from the cupboard and filled it, she said, "Tell her Martha said thanks." She was looking past me, and when I turned to see what was there she said, "That's where it began." She pointed at the kitchen table, and because of her pensive mood, for a moment I thought I'd stumbled into some sort of neighborhood triangle.

"That's where I found the manuscript of *HOME OF THE HEART*," she explained.

"Right here it was," she said, measuring with her hands the space it had taken on the table. "I was here one morning—borrowing some coffee as a matter of fact—and the telephone rang. When Amy went to answer it I saw all these typed-up pages on the table, and, being nosy, I began to read. Well, you know what it was—it was the manuscript of *HOME OF THE HEART*, only then it had a different title, I forget what. Could I bum a cigarette?"

I gave her one and lighted it, and she went on, explaining that she had read the first couple of chapters before Amy returned to the kitchen.

"At first she was kind of sore that I'd been reading it," Martha recalled, "but when I told her how wonderful it was she began to thaw out. I like to think I know a little bit about literature—I was on the staff of the campus literary magazine in college—and I knew from just what I'd read that it was a gem, this manuscript of Amy's that she'd finished without ever telling a soul. Even her husband didn't know she'd written it. She did the writing mostly at night when he was traveling and after Randy had gone to bed. Well, what happened was that I talked Amy into letting me read the whole thing. And I was fascinated, absolutely fascinated."

Martha went on to describe how she nagged Amy for weeks after that to send the manuscript to a publisher and how Amy had declined because she didn't think it was worth publishing.

"But I kept right after her," Martha said, picking up her coffee and starting for the door. "And at last Amy gave in and did what I told her to do—let a literary agent see it."

At the front door, Martha stopped. "I'm amazed every time I think about it. If it hadn't been for me *HOME OF THE HEART* might never had been published. Except for me, the number one best seller in the whole country might still be hidden away in a drawer under the guest towels. That is something to think about. Isn't it?"

I agreed that it was, and I was still thinking about it when Amy, flushed but triumphant, returned leading Bee-Jo by the collar, with Moline and Schaffer trailing and with the insurance men nowhere in sight. Moline was wiping his brow with a handkerchief, and Schaffer was huffing and puffing, loosening his necktie as he gasped for air. The two of them collapsed in the living room while Amy banished Bee-Jo to the cellar.

"We better make them a drink," Amy said, nodding toward the living room. She obviously was in better shape than they were.

I was getting out the ice when Arthur Phillips arrived, unexpectedly.

"Darling." Amy gave him a kiss that must have made him tingle all the way to his toenails. I know it did me, and I was standing fifteen feet away with my hands full of ice cubes.

Amy made the introductions and Arthur helped me make the drinks. He was about what you'd expect of a trophy-winning, All-American salesman. My first impression was that he'd won so many loving cups he was beginning to look like one. In a way he was handsome, but his crew cut gave him a flat top, that with the slightly v-shaped head and jut-

ting ears created the loving cup effect. Old Jug Ears, I thought.

He was six, three or six, four, but he had a way of balancing on the balls of his feet that made him seem taller and that made it possible for him to look down at me, although I was only an inch or two shorter. While we had our drinks Amy seemed jumpy—she kept picking things up and laying them down and rearranging knickknacks around the room—and I got the idea she would like us to leave.

“We better go,” I said, looking at Moline and at Schauffer, who was still trying to get his breath. “We can come back tomorrow for a conference with Amy. Right now, I imagine that she and Arthur want to, ah, talk things over.”

As we went to our cars in the street, Moline said, “Man, I’ve got a few things I’d like to talk over with that myself.” I said nothing, but I allowed myself to think what a shame it was that I had been so well brought up that I didn’t poke my fist into those great big beautiful teeth.

The three of us arranged to meet at Charlie’s café in Minneapolis for dinner, but Moline didn’t show up. Instead, he phoned to say he’d had a better offer from a girl he met in the lobby of the hotel, and within the hour I was wishing I’d asked if she had a friend.

Having dinner with George Schauffer was an experience; not an interesting one, just an experience. Not since the last time I went to Jones Beach, had I seen anything so wet. George swallowed martinis the way most people take cough medicine, in one grimacing gulp. He had four at the bar before I could get my wallet open to pay for them.

In the dining room he switched to old-fashioned “without the garbage” and wound up licking the ice cubes when the waiter was slow with the refill. Even sitting down he seemed short of breath.

Waving his empty glass at the waiter, he said, “We might as well have another drink; the fellow who audits my expense

accounts thinks everyone in the publishing business is a lush anyway."

I smiled, not amiably but tolerantly. Maybe everyone in the publishing business wasn't a lush, but George Schaffer was trying. After the third old-fashioned he got a little maudlin.

"A lousy way for Amy to treat me," he complained, "running out on me like that. I'm the one who *made* that book."

"You?" Usually I am more polite, but I wasn't able to repress the element of doubt.

"Yes me." He looked over his shoulder seeking the whereabouts of the waiter. "I created the title."

"So?" This time the tone implied more surprise than doubt.

"If I hadn't been called into the conference they had on the title, nobody would ever have heard of the damn book." For emphasis, he ended the sentence with an extra loud snuffle. "You know why it couldn't miss with my title?"

His manner was belligerent, and I began to feel as if I were being cross-examined by a pie-eyed district attorney.

"No," I said, "why?"

"Because it's got four words in the title."

"Four words?" He was drunk all right.

"That's it—Schaffer's Secret for Sudden Success—four words, no more, no less. All successful books by women authors have four-word titles. That's what was wrong with the original title; it had seven words. And I'm the one that fixed it."

He paused to wheeze and lap up the drink the waiter put before him. "Think back. There's *Gone with the Wind*, and *Lamb in His Bosom*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *The Egg and I*. All four words."

"How about *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*?" I figured I had him there.

"Like I said," George snuffled, "one too many words in

the title. If she'd dropped one, the book would have sold another hundred thousand copies."

By then I wasn't even sure that George knew what he was saying, let alone whether he meant it, and as soon as we finished dinner I left him at the bar, bobbing for olives.

Chapter 4

I SLEPT until nearly noon, and by the time I got back to Amy's house Moline and Schauffer were there ahead of me. So was Amy's agent, who had come to join the back-to-New York campaign.

The three were talking, and Amy was listening and knitting, and saying nothing, and perhaps, I thought, enjoying the spectacle of these adults pleading and squirming because they had hitched their futures to the whims of a stubborn Minnesota housewife. And although she was surrounded, Amy could be brave; she had the protection of the Lindbergh kidnaping law.

The agent's name was Janice Carlisle, and she looked about as literary as the Gabor sisters. She was about their size too. All of them, I mean. That was her most striking feature; there was so much of her, especially fore and aft.

But if the over-all effect was spectacular, it also was pleasing. Her face missed being beautiful only because of a

chin that was too square. She had a nice mouth, and it quickly became apparent that she knew how to use it.

"I'm so happy to know you," she burred when we were introduced. "I've been hearing about Lee Medford for years. Everyone seemed to know you but me."

It was a surprise to discover that a physique of such amazing proportions harbored a keen intelligence.

Before we could carry out my suggestion that we get better acquainted, it was time for Amy to pick up Randy at school, and the minute she was out of the house the phone started ringing again.

Although I should have known better, I answered. It was a woman who said she was calling from her home in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. All she wanted Amy to do was to provide the introduction to a book she was writing.

"It's a history of womankind," she explained. "I started with Eve, and now I'm up to Winnie Ruth Judd."

"Winnie Ruth Judd?" The trouble with me is that I get curious.

"Oh yes, I've worked on her since 1957."

I should have hung up right then, but I said: "Since 1957? How long have you been writing this book?"

"Since 1938." She sounded so sane too. "This is going to be the longest book ever written in South Dakota."

"When do you expect to have it finished?"

"Sometime in the late 1970's." She was so much in earnest that I couldn't bring myself to hang up.

"Mrs. Phillips isn't here, right now," I told her. "Why don't you call back later."

"When?"

"I'd say in about eight or nine years." I hung up, and I was still standing there thinking about this poor woman who would never live to see the completion of her life work when the phone rang again. It was an insurance man who wanted to sell Amy an annuity, and he was the last to call until after

Amy returned. Then she got two calls within five minutes, and I asked her why she didn't get an unlisted number.

"Oh no," she said, "not in this town. That would only prove that I'm getting uppity, putting on airs, and letting a touch of success go to my head. It would be considered un-neighborly, unfriendly, and even un-American."

While she was explaining this, a car pulled up in front, and a moment later the Phillips home was under surprise assault by a task force from *Focus* magazine, led by Walter Driscoll. With him were a willowy researcher named Daphne Wiley-Locke, who was known as Daffy, and a photographer named McCoy, whom Driscoll called "Irish." Daffy obviously was just out of Wellesley, and Irish looked as if he might be just out of the drunk tank at the county jail.

Their leader was not happy to see me. "How the hell did you get here so quick?" he asked.

"Hello Walter," I said, with hand outstretched. "I thought you were going to do the story on Amy in Indiana."

"That's what I thought you thought," he said, taking my hand without enthusiasm. "I decided we might as well get started up here, and I'd hoped to talk to Amy without you around. Press agents only get in the way at an interview."

I wanted to tell him that I wasn't a press agent, that I wouldn't be in the way, and that I hated people who went sneaking around when they thought I wasn't looking, but all I did was lead them into the house where Amy greeted them with a mixture of graciousness, bewilderment, and horror. She was too much of a lady to be anything but polite to a guest, even if he was self-invited.

From her, Driscoll could have taken lessons. When I introduced him to Moline and Schaffer, he said, "My god, I'm up to my chin in flacks."

Without asking Amy's permission, Driscoll took charge. "Let's get started with some pictures," he said. "Get your stuff from the car, Irish. Daffy, you get the tape recorder."

Walter was so impressed with the scope, importance, and influence of *Focus* magazine that he never bothered to ask Amy's permission for this invasion of privacy.

"Do you have time for this now, Amy?" I asked, partly because I felt responsible for what was going on but also because I remembered what had happened to the Sultan, and I didn't want Amy to simmer until she boiled over in an explosion that would queer the whole deal. Especially since she balked at going to Hawleyville; this might do just as well. But I got no thanks from Driscoll, who snapped:

"You keep out of this."

In a moment Irish was back with enough equipment to photograph the entire membership of the Authors League.

"Lemme see," he mumbled, "we got to have a better background."

Walking over to the couch where I was sitting, he said, "Get up." Some sort of reflex action helped me to my feet, and it was still working when he growled, "Pick up your end of the couch, and we'll move it over in front of the bookcase."

To Amy he pointed at the relocated couch. "Sit over there."

She sat, and he said to me, "Hand her a book."

I did as I was told, and he told her to "pretend you're reading."

Amy pretended while he started taking pictures, but within a minute he was grumbling again. "Got to have more height."

He looked around the room until he saw an antique straight-backed chair in the corner. "Bring that over here," he commanded Moline, who did as he was told while looking as if he would have preferred to throw it.

Irish put his foot on the chair and was starting to stand on it when Amy said, "Wait a minute." She left the room and came back with a kitchen chair and a newspaper to cover the seat.

"Use this." She could give orders too.

Unabashed, Irish stood on the chair and began taking pictures from that elevation while shouting instructions for Amy to "smile . . . look this way . . . look down . . . cross your legs . . ." He had been at it for about ten minutes when the proceedings were interrupted by the arrival of Norma Ackley.

Amy introduced Norma, who was her editor at Owen Boice and Company and who had come to join our group of Amy Neal satellites seeking her return to the New York orbit. She was a wispy frail creature who perhaps had been put on earth to counterbalance Janice Carlisle. Where Janice had too much of everything, Norma had too little. Her chin, if any, was hardly noticeable, and her torso was cylindrical, straight up and down from bust to waist to hips. Her nose was small and sharp, and she viewed the world suspiciously through watery grey eyes and round, black-rimmed glasses. Her straight, scraggly hair looked as if it had been cut by somebody with a grudge against the barbers' union. The only thing she seemed to have enough of was teeth, large protruding ones that clicked when she talked. At first I wasn't sure whether she was talking or sending Morse code.

While I was staring at her in wonder, the congestion was increased by the arrival of Amy's husband, who had celebrated her return home with a round of golf. Arthur immediately created a traffic snarl because he's the kind of fellow who can make a room seem crowded even if he's the only one there. Just walking through to shake hands, he stepped on a flash bulb, knocked over one of the lamps Irish had set up for the picture-taking, and bumped the tape recorder which would have fallen from the coffee table to the floor if Daffy hadn't caught it.

Before the introductions were over, the doorbell was ringing, and a neighbor walked in without waiting to be invited. She was carrying a petition urging the building of a new

wing on the junior high school, and when she saw the crowd in the living room she said, "Oh, I didn't know you were having a party."

"Neither did I," said Amy, "but come on in, and we'll get one started."

While she introduced the woman, whose name was Dixie something, Amy sent Arthur and Frankie to the kitchen to mix the drinks. She didn't have to send George Schaffer because he already was there, mixing his own.

Dixie something agreed to stay for a cocktail, and so did a real estate salesman who had dropped by to see if Amy needed a bigger house.

Looking at the jam in the living room, Amy sighed. "It's too late," she told him, "you should have come yesterday."

Amy returned to the sofa for more picture-taking, but Irish had disappeared. By the time Driscoll had dragged him out of the kitchen and perched him on the chair again, the doorbell was ringing. It was the husband of Dixie something who wanted to know what the chances were for having dinner.

"Poor," said Dixie, "very poor." She seemed to find Frankie Moline fascinating. "Go into the kitchen and make yourself a drink," she told the hungry husband. "We can eat later."

By this time I would have said that all that was needed for complete pandemonium in the living room was the appearance of Bee-Jo, who was barking furiously in the basement. But I had forgotten about Randy, who showed up with two of his friends and began playing a card game on the floor, oblivious of the danger of being trampled.

Irish said he wasn't high enough and asked where he could get a stepladder. Amy sent him next door and directed George Schaffer to the nearest liquor store after he reported the supplies were dangerously low.

I managed to squeeze past Dixie something, who was asking Frankie Moline if he knew Gregory Peck, to get into the

living room with drinks for Janice Carlisle and the real estate man. Janice was telling him about the time she started out for a football game at Annapolis and wound up in Minneapolis, and the realtor, a short man, was gazing up at Janice with the awe of a tourist seeing the Empire State Building for the first time.

"Everybody was absolutely stoned," explained Janice.

"Yes huge," said the real estate man. "I mean huge mistake."

Daffy was leaning over between Amy and Driscoll holding a microphone, and Randy and his pals were settling a dispute in the card game by wrestling on the floor.

As I passed the sofa I heard Driscoll ask, "Why are you afraid to go back to Hawleyville?"

"What makes you think she's afraid?" I asked, shaking my head to Amy.

"Listen, Medford," Walter declared imperiously, "you stay out of this. I don't want any stage managing of this interview."

"Then stop acting like the director." I could be snappish too.

"Excuse me," said Amy, going to the writhing pile of small bodies at the other end of the room, pulling them apart, admonishing them, and then getting the card game going again.

"Oh, hell," grumbled Driscoll, "now that you've fouled things up I might as well get a drink, if there's any left."

He headed for the kitchen and reached the opening into the hall just in time to collide with the end of the stepladder that Irish was carrying over his shoulder.

Walter swore, but Irish ignored him and got the ladder set up in the middle of the room. With Daffy's assistance, he managed to make it to the top of the ladder, although bumping his head on the ceiling and nearly dropping his camera.

He got Amy settled on the couch again, but then the

phone began to ring. When Amy started to get up Irish shouted, "Somebody else get the phone."

I got there first, although I bumped into George Schaffer, nearly causing him to drop the bag of supplies he had picked up at the liquor store.

The call was from Indianapolis. "This is Amy's cousin Ernest," said a man who talked through his nose.

"Just a minute," I said, "I'll see if she can come to the phone."

"No, no," Ernest pleaded. "Don't call her. We ain't speaking. Just give her a message."

"All right," I said.

"Just tell her that Cousin Ernest wants to borrow five thousand dollars."

"All right," I said, "I'll tell her, and she can let you know. Good-bye."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute." Ernest was frantic. "Don't hang up. Ask her now. I need the money *now*."

So I wormed my way back into the living room.

"Your cousin Ernest is on the phone," I told Amy, while being careful not to get in camera range. "He wants to borrow five thousand dollars."

"Ask him what for," Amy said.

By squeezing between Janice Carlisle and the real estate dealer, I managed to get back to the phone.

"What for?" I asked.

"To open an ice cream stand."

Back I went to Amy who said, "Tell him no. He'll just lose it; anyway he hasn't spoken to me for fifteen years."

So I told him no, and that set off some of the foulest, swearing I've heard since I spent a weekend at Vassar. The gist of it was that since Amy had become a rich bitch she had no time for her family, and he was still at it when I hung up.

I tried to get back into the living room, but I was stopped

by Irish. "Why doesn't somebody bring me a drink?" he asked. "It's hot up here on the ladder."

On my way to the kitchen I ran into Arthur Phillips, who asked, "Why don't we all go bowling?"

"Why not," I said and hurried on. By the time I was back with a drink for Irish another neighbor had arrived, the mother of one of the front room card players. I had hopes this would reduce the population explosion in the Phillips living room, but when she saw what was going on she called her husband, told him to turn out the fire under the roast, and bring over all their ice cubes.

Walter Driscoll, I noticed, had given up trying to interview Amy and was attempting to interest Norma Ackley in a novel he never had found time to write.

Frankie Moline was complaining that they were out of soda water, and Arthur Phillips was asking if anyone wanted to go play some handball.

In the bedlam, I found myself next to Amy who said, "Come on, let's go buy something to feed this mob. They'll never go home until they get fed, and I made the mistake of letting the housekeeper go as soon as I got home."

In the car she took a deep breath. "This fresh air smells good," she said. "You can't even breathe in there. And to think I came home to get some peace and quiet."

"We can start back to New York," I suggested. "Right now. In that mob, nobody would miss us."

"Oh no," she said, "it won't always be like this."

As she backed the car into Keats Road, I tried to set the record straight. "I had nothing to do with the invasion by that magazine crowd," I told her.

"No?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die." I went through the motions. "I had no idea they were coming up here."

"It's all right," she said, and then, surprisingly, added, "I don't care. It's sort of fun."

We rode toward the center of Laketon in silence until she asked, "How did *you* like the book?"

"Fine," I said, "It's wonderful."

"What did you think of Sweatsox O'Malley?" she asked. "Some people think he was overdrawn."

"Well, I ah." I was going to try to bluff it through, but when I glanced at her I detected the slightest trace of a smile at the corner of her mouth.

"Wait a minute," I said. "There isn't any Sweatsox O'Malley."

She laughed so hard I was afraid she was going to drive off the road.

"I almost had you, didn't I?" she asked.

"Well, ah . . ."

"You haven't read it, have you?" she asked, taking a corner so fast I slid against the door.

Once more I found myself in the peculiar state of being unable to tell a lie. "No," I admitted, "but my secretary has."

It was a dumb thing to say, and she laughed so hard she ran through a stop light.

At a delicatessen we bought cold meats and potato salad, and as we came into the house with the stuff I heard Arthur Phillips saying, "What would you think of going to a golf driving range and knocking out a few balls?" Irish was sitting on the top of the step ladder, rocking it from side to side and saying, "How about another drink for the man on the flying trapeze?" And as I passed Dixie something I heard her telling Frankie Moline, "Now that's a very interesting proposition."

After putting the food in the kitchen, I was standing in the front hall nibbling a sandwich and getting some fresh air from the door that had been left open when two more persons arrived. They walked right in and introduced themselves as Lucy and Harry Malcom, neighbors from across the street.

"We just dropped in to see if we could borrow Arthur's indoor putting green," said Harry, with some embarrassment.

But that made Lucy laugh. "Like hell we did," she said. "We came over to see what's going on. There hasn't been this kind of noise in the neighborhood since the Harrisons had their square dance two years ago." Lucy, I discovered, believed in plain talk and lots of it.

Backing me into a corner, she began extracting my life story which went along smoothly for about twenty seconds until I admitted that I lived in New York.

From the way she carried on about that you'd think I also had confessed I was Fidel Castro's barber. New York is a terrible place, she told me, and the worst thing about it was what it had done to Amy in less than three months.

"When Amy left for New York she had serenity; she was the sweetest, calmest person in the entire town," Lucy said, tapping my chest with her finger as if she wanted to make sure I was still awake.

"Of course I haven't seen too much of her since then, but she has been back from time to time, for a week or a weekend, and I can notice the difference. Why now she uses four-letter words, and not just hell and damn either. What do you think of that?"

"I think it's just fine." Why should I care?

But it was the wrong thing to say because it set Lucy to thumping me on the chest again; harder this time, as if she were testing to see if I was ripe. "That's another thing," she said. "Now Amy's getting to be a smart aleck like the rest of you. None of you care about the truth; you're too anxious to say something clever. All of you." She waved her hand toward the living room to show that she was talking about the whole New York expeditionary force.

"And another thing." She was really wound up. "Since Amy has been spending her time in New York she's lost that beautiful serenity; she's getting nervous and jumpy." She pointed a finger at me, and I must have twitched in expecta-

tion of being jabbed again because she said, "See, you're as jumpy as the rest of them."

Of course, Lucy added, she was not one of those who say that Amy returned from the East with a swelled head, although there are quite a few who have been saying so ever since her first trip to New York, which was weeks ago.

"And I don't blame Amy for buying a mink coat, either, as long as she can afford it," Lucy continued, "but it does seem sort of pretentious to wear it to the supermarket when it isn't even cold out. She did that, you know."

Of course I neither knew nor cared, but I said, "Tsk," protectively, to escape the chance of having my chest thumped again.

"And then there's that car, that fire wagon of a Cadillac," said Lucy, making General Motors a partner to the indictment. "It's perfectly all right for her to buy a Cadillac, but I want to tell you I was really shocked by what she said when I asked her why she bought it. I don't suppose you know what that was."

I said I didn't suppose I did.

"She told me, and these are her exact words, 'I bought it just because I wanted the god damn thing.' That's what she said."

Everything that had been said raised my opinion of Amy, but I managed to keep a straight face as Lucy continued to pile up the evidence. "There's this annoying New York habit she's picked up of kissing everyone hello and good-bye, including the men, whenever she goes to a party. Amy says it doesn't mean anything, that everybody kisses anybody in New York; it's like shaking hands. But around here if some other woman busses your husband you kind of wonder. You wonder how'd they get to know each other that well."

Lucy asked me for a cigarette, and while I was lighting it I wondered if I could escape by setting her on fire, but that didn't seem practicable. Her skin looked as if it might be

partly asbestos anyway. So, I decided that if I matched her straight-from-the-shoulder kind of talk she might retreat and let me go have another drink.

"The trouble with you suburban types," I told her, "is that you expect everyone to be exactly like you. If they're any different, they're snobs, or nuts, or Communists."

She blinked, and before she could recover her balance, I added: "As a matter of fact, I have news for you. Not everyone wants to live in a world of diapers, P.T.A. meetings, Brownie Scouts, trips to the supermarket, bridge clubs, and Saturday cocktail parties." I spoke with some conviction because it had taken a divorce to save me from that fate.

"Now wait a minute." Instead of retreating, Lucy moved a few inches closer, and when she stabbed me with her finger this time I thought she'd pierced a lung. "Don't get the idea that I'm not still fond of Amy. There isn't anybody I admire more; she's got character and integrity. The only reason I'm complaining is that I don't want her to change."

I was surprised by a new intensity in her manner, by the piercing gleam of sincerity in her eye.

"Let me say one more thing about Amy Neal Phillips," she said. "Amy has more integrity than any person I know, including my own mother. If Amy says it's so, then you can bet your life that it is."

She stuck out her chin as if daring me to deny *that*, and I realized that she genuinely admired Amy.

I was saved from having to find a suitable reply when Arthur Phillips bore down on us. "Come on and go bowling," he said, grabbing my arm. "We need one more."

"Excuse me," I told Lucy, "it's been a pleasure listening to you."

Within two minutes I was in the back seat of a car with Janice Carlisle, headed for the bowling alley that proved to be only the first stop en route to a more rewarding pastime.

Chapter 5

IF A MAN is to claim a full life there are certain wondrous sights he must have seen—the Matterhorn, Anita Ekberg, the Empire State Building, Jayne Mansfield, the Taj Mahal, Gypsy Rose Lee in her prime.

Another of these is Janice Carlisle in a bowling alley.

When Janice took her stance, with the bowling ball held at chest level, she transformed herself into the living, breathing counterpart of a pawn broker's symbol. As it might look attached to the Washington Monument.

Again and again as her turn came around an awed silence descended on the alleys while bowlers stared, peered, and gawked at what they saw but didn't believe.

Even without the attraction of such perceptible pectorals, Arthur Phillips drew a crowd of his own admirers as he whipped his shots down the alley at cannon ball speed. With a high game of 286, Arthur said he was having an off night.

The fourth member of our party was the photographer,

Irish McCoy, who by this time was well over his load limit. He, too, got some attention when he rolled a strike—in the alley next to ours.

Unwatched and ignored, I was able to bowl my usual crummy game while keeping Janice under surveillance and trying to fathom Arthur Phillips' distortions of the art of communication. Arthur had compressed his bowling vocabulary into a single expression, freely translated as "whups." Its pronunciation ranged between a hoot and a snort, and its meanings seemed unlimited. Depending on the requirements of the moment and the inflection, "whups" could mean, for example: "Oh damn" or "hot damn"; "yes" or "no"; "hold it" or "go ahead." Having discovered the universal utterance, Arthur had all but abandoned the language. Anyway, his actions, combining the grace of a panther with the power of a grizzly, spoke for themselves.

No wonder that Irish, who had to follow him, rolled four consecutive gutter balls and retired to the bar where he kept his interest in the sport alive by repeatedly yelling, "Set 'em up in the other alley" until the manager came over and asked if we would mind removing him from the premises. That was all right with me because, while observing Janice Carlisle, I had been renewing interest in another sport that over the years has won even more popularity than bowling.

On the way back to Amy's house I began to get the impression that my interest was shared by Janice, a notion that was intensified by the speed with which she accepted my invitation of a ride to Minneapolis in my rented car.

While I was telling Amy good night she said that Walter Driscoll and the rest of the *Focus* magazine crew were going along the next day when she was to take her Cub Scout den on a hike and cookout. The idea was that *Focus* would get some pictures of Amy and some copy for Walter's article. And would I care to go along? At 9:00 A.M. on a Saturday morning? Naturally I said I'd be delighted.

Back at the hotel with Janice Carlisle I really was delighted when I asked if she'd like to come up for a drink and she said yes but she wasn't thirsty. Neither was I.

As we walked into the sitting room of my suite, I must confess some feeling of awe at the magnitude of the impending enterprise, a prospect that stirred the blood. Now I knew how Hilary had felt at the threshold of Everest.

Reaching the summit might take a while, but the trip was sure to be worth it.

We were out of the base camp and into the bedroom in no time, but from there on progress was a little slower and less exhilarating than I had expected because Janice proved to be a talker, whereas in these situations I am inclined to be more of a doer.

She had one of those hollow, echoy voices that sound as if they are being bounced up from the bottom of a cistern and somewhat resemble what you hear on the radio after the news announcer says, "Come in Warsaw."

She had decided to tell me how she found Amy Neal, in relation to which all other discoveries, including Columbus' sighting of the New World, were nothing.

"You see," she said as I switched off the light, "I have this lecture I dust off every fall entitled 'Ladies in Literature' and when it's delivered by that 'well-known New York Literary agent' the Women's Clubs eat it up. Believe me, Lee, they really do."

Although by this time I was nibbling an ear and fumbling around with zippers and things, I wasn't interfering with her story in the least. She could have been addressing the Junior Woman's Club of Ottumwa, Iowa.

"It was at one of those Women's Club affairs right out there in Laketon," Janice recalled. "I gave the lecture at a luncheon—my god, Lee, I must have eaten twice my weight in chicken à la king in the last five or six years—and Amy was the program chairman who met me at the airport and took

me back there afterwards, in a rattle-trap old Chevy, as I remember it.”

I found myself trying to estimate Janice’s consumption of chicken in pounds. With her chattering that way it wasn’t easy to concentrate on why I was there.

“On the way back to the airport after the luncheon,” she babbled, “we stopped at a bar. Believe me, Lee, after one of those affairs, I’m thirsty. So we had a little time before my plane left, and it was after the fourth martini, or maybe only the third, that Amy told me she had written a novel. . . . Oooh . . .

“Well now, Lee, you know how often I run into this sort of thing—I sometimes think there isn’t a housewife in this whole world who *hasn’t* written a novel, or what she thinks is a novel—and in these cases I ordinarily just say, ‘well isn’t that nice’ and quick tell a dirty story or something to change the subject. But this time something stopped me.”

If only, I thought, I knew what that something was.

“There was something about Amy,” she continued, “that made me stop and say, ‘wait a minute, this time it might be different.’ So without really understanding why I was doing it, I told her to send the manuscript to me, and I’d see if it looked salable . . . My, you are sweet Lee . . . You know, usually I tell these housewives who think they are authors that I now have all the clients I can handle but that I’ll let them know if I ever have an opening.”

I could tell she knew I was there because she handed me her brassiere.

“But this time I actually *encouraged* Amy to send me that manuscript. Honestly, I later thought I must have been out of my mind to do that—but only until I got the manuscript. You should have seen it, Lee. It was actually a riot. Some of it wasn’t even double-spaced . . . oh boy . . . and parts of it were crossed out, and she’d written in whole paragraphs here

and there along the margins, and when I began reading it I actually asked myself: 'why am I doing this?'"

She wasn't the only one.

"But believe me, Lee, after I'd read the first paragraph I *knew* this was a best seller, a modern classic. . . . Lee, you *are* a doll . . . This is *the* book I said to myself, and I was so sure of it I decided to send it to Owen Boice and Company because . . ."

Oops! Here was the summit, perhaps the supreme moment of human experience, and I could tell Janice knew I was still there because she mentioned my name.

"Lee, they have the best advertising and promotion program in the business as well as the best sales force. But still there was a big element of chance because I had to work through Norma Ackley, who's the chief editor at Owen Boice. You met her today, Lee, so you'll know what I mean. I wouldn't say this in public, but I think I can trust you to keep a confidence, Lee, and tell you that without question she's the world's worst editor. She doesn't like *anything*. If it had been up to her she would have rejected *Gone with the Wind*. She's one of those people who think they know everything about fiction but know absolutely nothing. You won't believe this, Lee, but I had to go over her head—that's right, over her head—to Mr. Boice himself to sell him *HOME OF THE HEART*. I knew it was a great book. Believe, me, Lee . . ."

I believed her, but she'd lost me to Morpheus.

At daylight I woke up with a crick in my back and one foot on the floor. Janice was taking up nine-tenths of the bed, and I was happy to let her have my ten per cent, too. I dressed quietly and hurried away after leaving a note saying I had gone hiking with the Cub Scouts.

They say hiking tones up the system, but it also can result in foot blisters and, under certain conditions, can cause some pretty weird complications.

True, the trip to Crowell's woods that day was a triumph

for Freddy Halloran, age ten, who returned home with three live garter snakes and a toad. But for some of the others it was a fiasco. Take Walter Driscoll, age thirty-eight. He got the craziest case of poison ivy you ever heard about. And, as far as Walter is concerned, you won't hear about it. Not from him.

Wearing sensible flat-heeled shoes and a determined expression, Amy led our column of eager adventurers out Pinecone Lane toward the woods where we were to have our cookout. She was flanked on one side by Walter Driscoll, who was wearing an Alpine hat and carrying a portable tape recorder, and on the other side by me. Behind us shuffled George Schauffer, wheezing and snuffing every foot of the way. Behind George came the eight Cub Scouts, in uniform, followed by Frankie Moline, in alligator shoes. Irish, the photographer, wearing a pallid grey hangover, was stumbling along as if he were in the last stages of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow.

From the rear, Moline kept bawling, "One, two, three, four . . . all right, shape up men" and trying to sing "Madoiselle From . . ." while Amy kept shushing him.

In case you wonder why Arthur Phillips wasn't there, he was right where you would expect to find him, on the golf course. Norma Ackley had begged off too. She said she had flat feet, and, from what I'd seen of her, I could believe it.

Our first casualty was George Schauffer, who lasted for five blocks, until Pinecone Lane crossed the Minneapolis Highway where, on the far left corner, hung a sign proclaiming "Bar and Grill." George might be short on breath and endurance, but his eyesight was 20-20.

"If you'll excuse me a moment, I think I'll stop in here for a drink," he said, adding "of water" as he surveyed his bright-eyed and pink-cheeked companions.

"Here you are, Mister," said Scout Freddy Halloran, offering his canteen in the day's first good deed.

"No thanks, sonny," George replied, rubbing his neck. "You see, I have this throat trouble, and I have to have a special kind of water."

As George broke ranks and waddled toward the saloon, Freddy was overheard telling Randy Phillips, "I'll bet he's going to get smashed."

Freddy sure knew his stuff; that was the last we saw of George Schauffer for three days.

As he watched George go, Irish's complexion changed from grey to envy-green, but under Walter Driscoll's stern eye he couldn't desert his assignment. Licking his cracked lips and loosening his tie, Irish asked weakly, "Can I run over and get some cigarettes?" He waved vaguely toward a drug store, and when Walter told him to go ahead I guessed he hadn't noticed the liquor store on the other corner. As Irish caught up with us a few minutes later he was bulging in several places, and he seemed happier.

While we trudged along down a gravel road, Walter did his best to interview Amy while she, in turn, tried to keep the members of her den from running off into the woods or paying too much attention to Frankie Moline who was regaling the marchers with recollections of his experience as a Boy Scout in Brooklyn "for two weeks," before he won all the Scoutmaster's money in a poker game.

"The crumb accused me of using marked cards and kicked me out of the troop," Frankie complained.

"Keep quiet, will you Frankie?" Walter begged. "I'm trying to talk to Amy."

Walter conducted an interview only after careful preparation. First he'd think up what he'd like to have from his subject and then ask only questions that were likely to bring the answers he wanted. He was clever about it, or maybe sneaky is the word.

As he peppered Amy with his leading questions, I could see that he was trying to build up the picture of the harried

mother and housewife who managed to write a novel in bits and pieces between cooking and the dish washing, after the ironing and before the mending, grabbing a couple of minutes here and there and then over the years fitting these odd paragraphs together into a smoothly flowing and coherent novel.

"Did you write on the backs of old laundry lists?" Walter asked, leading Amy along his charted path.

"Of course, and how did you know?" She looked surprised. "I wrote on the back of laundry lists, grocery lists, milk slips, blank checks, match covers, anything I could scribble on that was handy. But I would keep misplacing them; once I found a whole chapter written on the backs of Christmas cards packed away in the closet with the tree ornaments. Another chapter in the pocket of an apron went through the washing machine one day, but it was just as well because it needed cleaning up. And another time I wrote a chapter on the back of some of Randy's school papers which got mixed up with his books and handed in to his English composition teacher. She sent it back marked 'C minus.'"

"Now wait a minute." Walter was waving his hands and shaking his head. "Did any of this really happen?"

"No." Amy managed to look innocent. "None at all."

"Well, for heaven's sakes, what's the idea?" For once Walter had to ask a question without knowing the answer, and that annoyed him.

"Ask silly questions, and you get silly answers." Amy was firm about it. "If you want honest answers, you'll have to quit trying to lead me into saying what it is you want to hear."

"Well now, just a minute." Walter flushed, embarrassed at being caught up and mad because he was being embarrassed. For a moment I thought Amy had queered the whole deal, but when she smiled Walter regained his composure.

"Touché," he said, "I'll be good. But where *did* you write HOME OF THE HEART?"

"On the kitchen table, with a typewriter. And not between chores either. I did it at night after Randy was in bed and while Arthur was traveling."

Before Walter could pursue his questions, we had reached Crowell's woods, and Amy was organizing parties to search for firewood. Walter said he'd go with Daffy, his researcher, who had missed our takeoff but had caught up with us in a taxi. Irish said he'd go by himself. Several of the boys insisted on being accompanied by their new hero, Frankie Moline, who was telling them how he'd made a switch-blade knife out of a letter opener and the spring from a screen door on his tenth birthday. I sat down on a log and took off my shoes because my feet hurt, and as soon as the boys were out of sight Amy lighted a cigarette.

Hopefully, I asked, "Have you thought any more about the Hawleyville trip?"

"Yes."

"Any decision?"

Amy started blowing smoke rings. She was good at it, too. Finally, she said, "I'm not going."

"Now look, Amy." I tried again. "It would be good for the book, good for the movie, and good for you."

"Um-hm," she nodded. "That's exactly what they told me before I went to Cleveland."

"What's that got to do with Hawleyville?"

"Same sort of a deal." As she studied the burning end of the cigarette she looked unhappy. "It was a simple little thing; all I had to do was speak for thirty minutes to a woman's club. Nobody told me this was going to be in a big auditorium with more than four thousand women there. And of course I didn't know that the public address system was going to conk out after the first couple of minutes. There I was, shouting as loud as I could, but nobody was hearing me beyond the third row—except that every once in a while the sound would switch on again, and then, since I was yell-

ing anyway, my voice would blast through the hall, piercing eardrums in all directions. I sounded like a jet breaking the sound barrier. Finally they got an electrician who crawled under the table and found the trouble; the chairman of the meeting was one of those nervous, foot-swinging types and she had been kicking the microphone connection off and on. By that time I was so irritated and embarrassed that I muttered, 'Well, for Christ's sake.' And you can guess what happened. At that moment the electrician got everything hooked up again, at full power, so I could be heard all the way to Detroit."

Amy threw the cigarette on the ground and stamped on it. "How I got through the rest of the speech, I'll never know. And that's one of the reasons I'm not going to Hawleyville."

A couple of boys were back with their firewood, and Amy went with them to the center of a clearing to get the fire started. Freddy Halloran returned with the first of his captured snakes, and he was followed shortly by a boy named Ronnie who shouted, "Hey, Mr. Driscoll and Miss Daffy are having a fight."

"Oh now, Ronnie," said Amy patiently. "You must be mistaken."

"No I'm not; I saw 'em." Ronnie spoke with the authority of an eyewitness. "They were wrestling and Mr. Driscoll was winning because . . ."

"Shut up, stupid." Freddy Halloran had edged around to Ronnie and poked him with his elbow.

"But it's true," Ronnie persisted. "They're right down by the brook. I saw 'em. Mr. Driscoll . . ."

"Shut up, nutty." Having poked the boy again, Freddy now was leaning over whispering in his ear. As he listened, Ronnie's face turned red, and he looked both embarrassed and puzzled, but after a minute he turned away and began chopping at the end of a dead log with his axe.

"Let's get the food out," said Amy, being careful not to look my way.

A couple more boys returned with armloads of wood, followed by Irish who had a load that wasn't wood. A couple of the bulges had disappeared from his pockets, and he was in a carefree mood. "Anybody seen my camera 'round here?" he asked, as I snatched it up off the ground just in time to keep him from stepping on it. He wanted to get some shots of Amy cooking, but she told him to wait until all the boys returned, and she asked me to help her find them. As we started the search, Amy was careful to go in the opposite direction from the brook, where Ronnie had seen whatever it was he saw. We quickly found the missing boys behind a clump of bushes with Frankie Moline. He was teaching them to shoot craps.

"There ya are gents," Frankie was saying as Amy walked up behind him. "I'll bet a quarter; any part of it's open." He was blowing on the dice.

"Come on boys," Amy said, tapping Frankie on the shoulder.

"Oh, hi there Amy," said Frankie. "Want to fade a quarter?" From his viewpoint, everything was perfectly normal.

"Come on." Amy looked mad.

Frankie and the boys got off their knees. "Did any of you boys lose any money?" Amy asked.

"Not any money," said one, "just my scout knife."

With a shrug, Frankie reached into his pocket. "Here ya are, kid. I wasn't going to keep it."

Amy was shaking her head at Frankie. "I'm surprised."

"So am I," he said, brushing the dirt from the knee of his pants. "Never before heard of kids ten years old who didn't know how to shoot craps."

Amy led a silent procession back to the fire, and as we got there Walter and Daffy were arriving from the opposite direction. Walter looked pleased with himself, and Daffy looked a little mussed.

Irish was shouting for Amy to cook a hotdog over the fire, so he could get some pictures of her, and while she knelt beside the flames with a frankfurter on a sharpened stick he tried to get her into focus, moving nearer and nearer until his foot was almost in the fire, and bending over further and further to bring Amy closer. It wasn't easy, because he was weaving a little from side to side, too, but he seemed to have found the range when Amy shouted, "Look out!" Irish jumped backwards and dropped his camera into the flames.

"He's burning up," shouted one of the Scouts, and sure enough his necktie was blazing merrily. Another boy, living up to the "Be Prepared" motto, threw a cup of water at Irish. It was quick thinking, but in his excitement he threw the cup along with the water, and it hit Irish on the nose. The water ran down his shirt front and over the necktie, putting out the fire, but Irish, who still didn't know he had been ablaze, said he really wasn't that thirsty.

With a stick, Amy poked the camera out of the fire, but it was ruined. Irish said that didn't matter because he had forgotten the film anyway. He went off to mope, and when it was time to go home we found him asleep under a tree. Walter got him on his feet by promising him a drink at the first tavern we passed.

Our ranks thinned out fast for the return hike. Frankie Moline said he was ruining his sixty-dollar shoes and announced he would sit on a culvert by the road until he could hitch a ride. Irish volunteered to keep him company, and Walter announced that he and Daffy were going back to the brook to gather some moss they had seen there. He said it would be all right to go ahead without them.

For a moment Amy faced a mutiny in the ranks because the Cub Scouts insisted on staying with Frankie until he finished his story about the time he pushed the policeman into the East River and then got a medal for saving his life, but Amy said there would be no more of that and threatened to

make the Halloran boy, who was the ringleader, leave his snakes right there if he didn't behave.

Somehow we all made it back to Amy's house, and somehow I found myself inviting everyone to be my guests for dinner and dancing at the hotel that evening. While I wasn't exactly that fond of this crowd, I thought that if I got Amy on a dance floor with a little red wine in her blood I might be able to talk her into going to Hawleyville. Deep down, I'm an optimist.

It turned out to be quite a party with Amy and Arthur, Moline, Janice, Norma, Walter, Daffy, and, for a while, Irish, who disappeared after the master of ceremonies refused to let him sing in the floor show. George Schaffer still was A.W.O.L.

Arthur had to leave early because his volleyball team was playing at the "Y," and I promised to take Amy home.

By tipping the band leader, I got some soft, dreamy, sticky music for a dance with Amy, and the wine had been good. The setting was perfect for another plea that she take part in the Hawleyville project, but when I did she smiled and asked: "Did I ever tell you about Pittsburgh?"

Then she told me.

"I went out there to autograph HOME OF THE HEART at the biggest bookstore in town. They must have had five hundred copies all attractively arranged in one corner of the store, and the deal was that I was to be there for four hours. During that time I encountered exactly one customer—and she wanted her money back. She said I'd cheated her. The rest of the time I just stood there, staring at those acres of books and feeling foolish, unloved, neglected, unwanted. It was hell. Later I found out there had been a mix-up; the advertising and publicity had gone astray, and nobody knew I was to be there except the store manager and me. I'm jinxed on these publicity deals, and maybe it's only fair retribution be-

cause I don't really believe in them anyway—they're all tara-diddle. And that's why I won't go to Hawleyville."

Walter and Daffy left early. I think they were going to look for moss again, in Walter's room. Moline said he was tired and he guessed he'd turn in early, and Janice said she guessed she would, too, and I didn't even have to guess to know what they had in mind. That left me with Amy and Norma, and what could I do but ask Norma if she wanted to ride along to Laketon while I took Amy home. To be frank about it, I was glad to have Norma along as chaperone because while I had been dancing with Amy she had smelled so sweet and felt so soft that I had begun getting ideas that had nothing to do with Hawleyville, or HOME OF THE HEART, or Albert Foshay, but had everything to do with Amy Neal Phillips.

Chapter 6

AT Amy's house we found the baby sitter and Randy in tears. Bee-Jo was on the lam again, somewhere in the inky void that is nighttime in Laketon. Amidst all those tears, I had no choice but appoint myself organizer, leader, and sole member of the search party, and if you ever have hunted a coal black poodle at midnight in a community where the street lights are a block apart and where the city fathers are economizing with 60-watt bulbs, then you can understand what I went through.

Up and down the streets I went, calling "here Bee-Jo, nice Bee-Jo" in a voice that I hoped was soft enough to escape the notice of sleeping householders and loud enough to attract the dog, and yet, half hoping that the dog wouldn't hear me either because if he did he'd probably chew off an arm or a leg before I could cry for help.

Now and then I stopped to whistle, and when I saw a car coming I hid behind a bush. It was a good thing, too, because

it was a police prowler car, and I didn't feel up to explaining what I was doing. I hardly believed it myself.

In less than a half hour I was ready to give up and face Randy's tears and Amy's disappointment when I heard a low growl malevolent and anti-social enough to have come from Bee-Jo, and there in a shaft of light from an upstairs window I saw him. He was in a yard surrounded by an iron picket fence about four feet high, and I assumed he must have wandered in there to dig up a flower bed or two.

Feeling my way along the fence, I found the gate and groped about until my fingers closed on the latch. Once I was in the yard the dog reacted as I had expected, and when he leaped for me I gave him the knee in the chest, sending him to the ground with a thud. Before he could regain his breath, I grabbed him up, caught him by the collar so he couldn't nip me, and tucked him under my arm for the trip to Amy's. I wasn't taking any chances of losing him after all that trouble, but getting him out of the yard was a masterpiece of contortion and muscle control because the gate had a spring that had snapped it shut again.

Now carrying fifty pounds of snarling, snapping ill will for nearly four blocks is not a pastime I would recommend, but the way Amy and Randy carried on about my success made it all seem worthwhile. I had said good-bye and had Norma ready to leave when from the living room came a cry of despair from Randy, who then began to cry. When we reached him he was pointing to the dog's collar.

"It's not Bee-Jo," he yowled, "it's the Dixons' dog."

Inspecting the collar, Amy said, "He's right; that's Buster."

"Come on Buster," I said, grabbing him with something that resembled a half-Nelson. "We're going home."

At the door, with Buster writhing under my aching arm, I met Bee-Jo. He was lying on the porch, wagging his tail to show there were no hard feelings.

At the Dixons' I found the gate and got into the yard with-

out too much trouble; but the moment I put Buster on the ground he began to bark, and before I could turn around a woman appeared at the lighted second floor window. She saw me.

I would have been happy to explain, but she started screaming. "Help! Peeping Tom! Harvey bring the shotgun! Policel Peeping Tom!"

The gate had closed behind me, and I couldn't find the latch, although even without looking I could plainly see Harvey taking aim with his shotgun. In a crisis such as this I'm a man of action; not necessarily the right action, just action. So I jumped for it, and I made it, almost. As I came down on the other side of the fence I felt my pants rip and a picket scrape the skin from my thigh. Lights began snapping on all over the neighborhood, and the woman in the window kept libeling me with her screams, but Harvey must have been unable to find the gun, and by the time I got to Amy's the sounds seemed far off.

"Come on," I said to Norma, "let's go to Minneapolis, now!"

"What's all the racket back there?" asked Amy.

"Peeping Tom," I said, but I'm not sure she heard me because I had the car in gear and moving fast.

We were going up in the elevator at the hotel when Norma noticed the rip in my pants, and I had to tell her about my experience, which really was not as frightening as what happened when I got off the elevator. Norma Ackley got off too. Her room was on my floor, and she said if I would just stop in a minute she would put some iodine on my cut. When I tried to beg off she recalled a cousin who had ignored such a wound. "The only way they could save him was to cut off his leg at the hip," she said. "Blood poisoning."

So I went along and stood as close to the door as possible while she went into the bathroom to get the iodine. As she

came out with the bottle in her hand she said, "Take off your pants."

"Huh?" If you had seen Norma you would understand why I was at a loss for words.

"Take off your pants," she said again. "I can't put this stuff on through your clothes."

"Oh," I said, fumbling with the belt buckle and wondering if I wouldn't be better off with only one leg.

"Well come on." She was impatient. "Don't be so bashful." The click of her teeth punctuated the words.

So I did as I was told, and she dabbed the antiseptic on my leg while commenting, "My (click) that's (click) nasty (click). Tomorrow you better see a doctor (clickety-click)."

I promised I would and leaned over to pull up my pants, but I never made it. In one fluid motion, Norma dropped the iodine bottle, flung her arms around my neck, and pressed herself against me.

Many times since I've asked myself what I could have done. I was too big to yell for help. I couldn't run out of there without my pants. I couldn't slug her. But there was one thing I could do. I reached over and switched off the light. After that it was better.

Actually, I could have done worse than Norma. And I have—Janice Carlisle, for instance.

Whatever Norma lacked in natural attributes she made up for in enthusiasm. She gave her all, everything she had, and even though that wasn't much the finished performance was a blend of rock 'n roll, artificial resuscitation, and wrestling night at Madison Square Garden. A mugging with kisses.

I came through with only minor contusions and abrasions, but when I started to leave she grabbed me.

"Talk to me," she begged.

So what was there to talk about with Norma Ackley except Amy Neal?

"It's a shame," Norma said for an opener, "that Amy is tied to such an incompetent agent. She's really the worst, you know."

I knew, but I wasn't thinking of her professional competency.

"At that, I suppose I'm lucky that Janice is the way she is; otherwise I never would have had a glimpse of *HOME OF THE HEART*." Clickety-click, clickety-clack. "She sent me that manuscript because that was easier than returning it to the author with a letter of rejection. That way she could put the blame on me."

I tried to move, but her grip was like a vise.

"Actually, I was prejudiced against Amy's novel before I read it, partly because of Janice Carlisle and partly because it was another of those novels about life in a little midwest town. I sometimes feel that every woman who lives in a small town in the midwest thinks she has a novel in her system. But anyhow, after I'd read a couple of chapters I was sure it was *the* one in a million if it could be worked over, smoothed out, trimmed, and rearranged. So I put it up to the others around our publishing house who have to agree on such projects, and do you know what?"

"What?" Ever since I'd gotten mixed up with these literary types I'd been feeling more and more like a straight man.

"They were against it." Norma squeezed so hard I yelped, but she ignored me. "Every stupid one of them. I had to go to Mr. Boice himself and beg him to read that manuscript." Norma's teeth had stopped clicking and started grinding.

"Finally, after I badgered him for a month he said 'all right, go ahead' and approved an advance of seven hundred and fifty dollars. He did it just so I'd quit bothering him."

I wondered what it would take to get her to quit bothering me.

"Seven hundred and fifty dollars," she repeated, "for a manuscript that got a pre-publication movie sale, book club

sales, and the kind of reviews other authors dream about but don't get. And let me tell you I had one dickens of a time making a book out of the mess that Amy submitted on the first draft. It had no dramatic form at all. It started with the climax and then ran down hill for several hundred pages. I had to discuss it with Amy, but she said she couldn't afford to come to New York, and Owen Boice wouldn't pay my expenses to Laketon. So I went, and I paid my own way, and I showed Amy Neal how to make that mishmash into a novel. And then I nursed her along for weeks and weeks by mail and telephone until she finally got the whole thing into shape so that I could fix it by cutting and editing. I made that novel what it is, and now nobody knows and nobody cares."

Softly, she began to cry, and I leaned over and pecked her gently on the cheek. All I felt was compassion. Never has a kiss been more pristine, more devoid of passion, but, whoops, there we were back at Madison Square Garden.

Later, limp and battered, I tip-toed back to my suite, carefully locking the door behind me. Blood poisoning, I thought, would have been better.

The next day was Sunday, and I lay in bed until mid-morning, taking stock of my assortment of blisters, cuts, scratches, and contusions. As soon as I gathered enough strength to arise, I rented another car and headed for Laketon.

It had turned cold during the night, and when I went into Amy's living room there was her mink coat draped over a chair. Randy had let me in and had run upstairs to tell Amy I was there, and while I was waiting I could hear Amy and Arthur talking in one of the bedrooms. They must have been standing right next to the heating duct that came out in the living room beside my chair.

"I still say people will think you're showing off by wearing that coat to church," Arthur was saying. "Especially today; it wasn't that cold."

"Okay, I'm a show-off," said Amy. "It's my coat, earned,

bought, and paid for. So I can wear it to the beach in July if I want."

"Yeah, but you know how people are around here," Arthur persisted. "First there's that red Cadillac; now the mink coat. This isn't Cadillac and mink coat country, Amy. And you know the saying, when in Rome etcetera."

"All right," Amy sounded tired. "Next time I go to Rome I'll leave the mink at home."

"Whups," Arthur shouted, "stop being a smart aleck. Cadillacs, mink coats, and quips, always the quips. Whups all mighty, Amy, what's happened to you since you went to New York? Where's my sweater? Whups, I'm late already; I was supposed to be at the club at one."

He came bounding down the stairs, waved at me as he passed through the living room, muttered something as he passed the mink coat, slammed the door and roared away in his Chevrolet.

I was staring after him when I realized that Amy was in the room.

"Did you hear all that?" she asked.

"Some," I admitted.

"Noisy aren't we?" She didn't seem upset.

"I've heard louder." I was thinking of my former wife; she could yell in high C.

She went over and picked up the coat. "He's not really that angry about the coat; it's just that I talked him into taking me to church this morning when he wanted to play golf."

After hanging the coat in a closet she came back and sat on the couch opposite me. "That mink is taradiddle too, you know. I didn't need it, couldn't really afford it, and actually didn't want it, but George Schaffer said I ought to have a mink to wear around to those affairs in New York. 'All successful women wear mink,' he kept saying, 'it's like a uniform.' He kept after me until I bought one. Holy Moley!" She began to laugh. "One reason I didn't want to buy a mink

coat was that I didn't know how to go about it. I walked by Jay Thorpe's six times before I went in, just trying to think of what to say when I got inside. Should I say, 'I'd like to see something in mink'? If I got an uppity clerk she might reply, 'And *what* would you like to see in mink?' And it would be silly to say, 'I'm looking for a mink.' Would sound as if I'd lost one. Finally, I got enough courage to just march in, point at the first coat I saw, and say: 'I want that one.'

She offered me a drink, or a sandwich, but I said no thanks, all I really wanted was for her to agree to go to Hawleyville.

"I'm sorry." Amy looked as if she meant it. "But I just don't want to go back there."

Standing up, I got ready to leave. "I've got to go to New York," I told her, "but I'll see you soon." I wasn't going to quit.

I was at the door when she said, "Wait a minute" and ran upstairs.

When she came down she held out a copy of *HOME OF THE HEART*. "Here. You can read it on the plane going home."

As I took it I remembered the feeling I'd had that something was missing from her bookshelves. "Why," I asked, "isn't your book in the living room?"

"Oh I don't know." She really seemed embarrassed. "It just seems sort of pretentious to put my novel up there with Balzac and Chaucer and Faulkner and the like. My copies are upstairs on the shelf in the bedroom closet."

She was a strange one, cocky and self-assured in some ways, yet humble too. Right now she was looking at me with a crooked, shy smile that made me check the urge to kiss her good-bye. Instead I got her to autograph the book, and we shook hands as I left.

I started reading the book before I left the airport, and I kept on reading all the way to New York, even while eating dinner, and when I got off the plane I went into the waiting

room and found a chair where I stayed until the book was finished.

It was that kind of book, and when I reached the end I went to a telephone booth and called Amy to tell her so.

"Take it off the shelf in the bedroom," I said. "Put it in the living room. Balzac, Chaucer, and Faulkner would be honored to be in the company of Amy Neal."

She seemed so pleased that I took a wild shot and asked if she would change her mind about Hawleyville.

She said "No."

Chapter 7

FOR A couple of days after returning from Laketon I was too deeply immersed in other affairs of Lee Medford Associates to even think about Amy Neal, but on Wednesday I tried to call Walter Driscoll, without success. His office said he was “in and out,” and although I left my number, he didn’t call back. On Thursday I got the same treatment in the morning, and that afternoon I went to see him.

The receptionist in the editorial department of *Focus* magazine was a girl named Maggie who had been at the paper when Walter and I worked there. She and I kidded around a while, and, after paying extravagant homage to her physical structure and casting appropriate doubts on her chastity, I said it wouldn’t be necessary to announce me, as I wanted to surprise Walter, our old pal.

He was surprised, but he was no pal. He didn’t stand up or offer his hand, and his “hello” lacked warmth or enthusiasm.

Although he didn't ask me to sit down, I pulled up a chair and offered him a cigarette, which he took and allowed me to light for him.

"How did you get in?" he asked, and then answered himself, "Oh yes, you know Maggie."

When I asked, "Walter, how've you been?" he frowned and shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

Glowering at me, he picked up a letter opener and studied it carefully, as if he might be thinking of using it on me, like a stiletto.

"You're the one to ask me how I've been." Walter could handle sarcasm quite well. "You, who got me to go to Minnesota; you, who introduced me to that female nature lover; you, who took me to those woods where I got this poison ivy."

Gingerly, he changed his position while moaning, "Oh god!"

"I'm sorry to hear about that," I said, deciding not to remind him that going to Minnesota had been his own idea. "But poison ivy isn't so bad. Lots of people get it."

"Not where I got it." Walter flinched. "Have you ever heard of another case of poison ivy so rare the doctor wanted to write it up for the *Journal of the American Medical Association*?"

Having lifted the lid on his cauldron of misfortune, Walter let it boil over.

"Monday night," he said, "that's when I first noticed it. And when I saw where it was I almost slit my throat." He drew the letter opener across his Adam's apple to demonstrate.

"You got it *there*?" No wonder he was making medical history.

"There!" He winced. "And at first I never guessed it was poison ivy. I figured it was the end of my marriage. I

wouldn't even be allowed to see the kids. And for the rest of my life I'd be paying out support money."

That was what hurt most, the specter of alimony. Among other things, Walter was a skinflint.

"The first thing in the morning," he said, "I rushed over to the doctor. And do you know what he did? He took one look and busted out laughing. In thirty-five years of doctoring he said mine was the first case of poison ivy he'd ever seen there, and would I please tell him how I got it so he could write it up for the A.M.A."

The diagnosis took a load off Walter's mind, but it failed to solve his immediate problem.

"I can't go home." His voice was close to a sob. "How could I explain this to my wife? I couldn't. So she thinks I'm in Arkansas. I told her I had to go down there on an assignment. I'm living over here in a hotel and slinking around town in mortal fear I'll see someone who knows my wife. I can't answer the phone until the operator has screened the caller, and every three hours I have to go over to the hotel and sit in a tub of water that contains three tablespoons of this powder the doctor gave me."

"That's tough." I was almost sorry for him.

"Here's the worst of it." He slapped his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Tomorrow is my wedding anniversary, and she is going to be expecting me to call her up from Little Rock. Honest to god, I think I'm going to have to get on a plane and fly to Little Rock, just so I can call up my wife in Rye and wish her a happy anniversary." He pounded the top of his head with his closed fist. "I know, I know. It sounds nutty. Of course I could just call her up from the hotel and let her think I'm in Little Rock, but what if something went wrong? What if she found out I'm really in New York? What if she called Little Rock first and found out I'm not there? Oh, god."

Walter had worked himself into a state of anxiety that

would have been of more than passing interest at the Menninger Clinic.

By now Walter had won my curiosity, if not my complete sympathy.

"I don't understand," I said, "how you contracted this case of poison ivy in this, ah, strange location." I thought I knew, but I wanted to see if he'd tell me.

Walter crushed out his cigarette and looked out the window before answering. He was deciding whether to be a rat, and that didn't take him long.

"Well." He was a little hesitant. "You remember last Saturday when Daffy, you know the researcher, and I went off looking for wood. We found this lovely little spot down by the brook, one of those bosky dells, and, well hell, we were sitting there talking and something was said about Vassar girls and their full sex life."

Watching Walter, I wondered if I only imagined he was blushing.

"Well hell, Daffy said anything a Vassar girl can do a Wellesley girl can do better," Walter explained. "And she's, ah, well, she's a Wellesley girl. Or was."

Walter paused and looked out the window again. "I guess a gentleman shouldn't talk about such things," he said, and went ahead, proving what I'd known all along. "And how the hell was I to suspect there was poison ivy around there? It's not usually out so early in the year."

Glancing at his watch, he said, "It's almost time for my three o'clock soaking. I better . . ."

The phone rang, and he answered it timidly in a strained voice that he obviously hoped didn't sound like his own.

"Yes. Oh hello Daffy." Beads of sweat popped out all along his hair line.

"Yes, I did wonder about that. Yes I did."

He closed his eyes. "Oh yes? Gee, that's too bad."

Covering the mouthpiece with his hand, he whispered to me, "Poison ivy."

"I'm sorry about that." He dabbed at his forehead with his handkerchief. "Yes I know it must be uncomfortable, but it's not serious. It could be worse."

"What do I mean by what?" He looked alarmed. "By that? Why I don't mean anything by that."

"No, no, no! Of course not . . . Well, I don't know why I said it. Just some stupid thing that popped out. I wasn't thinking . . . Not at all . . . It was not subconscious. I didn't mean anything at all . . . Well hell fire, Daffy, how was I to know the godam stuff was there . . . Now, now, Daffy, I wasn't swearing *at* you . . . I'm sorry, I really am. Tell you what; along about next week I'll take you to dinner, any place you say. Four Seasons, anywhere . . . Now, Daffy, I'm really awfully busy right now. I'll call you next week . . . Yes I will . . . I promise . . . Yes, yes, of course . . . Bye."

He slammed down the phone and loosened his necktie. "My god, why did they have to invent women?"

I figured if he didn't know by now he never would, and so I changed the subject and told him I wanted to talk about the Amy Neal article for *Focus*. He said he had to go to the hotel for his three o'clock soaking and if I wanted to talk I'd have to come along. "I've got a jug over there," he said. "We'll have a drink."

While he climbed into the tub I mixed us a couple of drinks with tap water, and we talked about the magazine layout on Amy. What I wanted to know was whether he couldn't go ahead and do a piece just with what he got in Laketon.

"She says she won't go to Hawleyville," I explained.

"She's got to or there'll be no article." Walter was firm about it.

"But how about the material you got in Laketon?" I asked. "Isn't there enough there?"

"Not really. And you saw the shape Irish was in. He must have taken a hundred shots and not more than two or three are any good. Sometimes he got Amy's nose, sometimes her ear, sometimes one eye or the other but practically never her full face."

"How about a return engagement in Laketon?" I asked. "With a sober photographer this time, and some advance warning to Amy."

"Nope." Walter never bothered with tact when he was dealing with someone who needed him. "The Laketon scene is only half of it, and Hawleyville is the rest. I like the original idea, and that's the way it's going to be. If Amy doesn't want a million dollars worth of free publicity, then that's your problem."

For once Walter was right. It was my problem; and I promised to see if I could solve it.

I left him sitting in the bathtub, and I was almost out in the hall when he called after me. "Do you think I ought to go to Little Rock tomorrow to make that phone call?"

"Sure," I said, "good idea."

Anything that would put hundreds of miles between me and Walter Driscoll had to be good.

As I walked out into the street I remembered that Herb Gardner had been calling me for a couple of days, and I had been ducking him while Walter had been avoiding me. At the moment I was so discouraged that I decided I might as well go see him and get it over with.

The future looked so bleak that I took the subway down to Wall Street instead of a cab; next week I might need the money.

Herb kept me waiting, and ordinarily I wouldn't have minded because of his receptionist who a few years back had been sixth runnerup, or some such, in the Colorado finals of the Miss America contest. But this day I realized her hair wasn't naturally blonde and that she had beady eyes. By the

time Herb Gardner was ready to see me I had decided he was a little less than perfect, too.

The trouble with Herb is that since he's made it big in securities he figures that qualifies him as an expert in spades. He's cordial, generous, pleasant, and easy to get along with. As long as you agree with him. And in Herb's presence there isn't much else you can do; he always takes charge. Put him in a taxi and he's telling the driver what route to take, even if it's only from Grand Central to Times Square. Take him to a restaurant and he's telling the chef how to make the sauce for the roast duck. If he ever has surgery it'll have to be with a local anesthetic; so he can supervise the operation.

He's a big man, not fat but beefy. His shoulders are square; so's his jaw; and so's his head, inside and out. A square shooter, that's what everyone thinks the first time they see Herb Gardner; he inspires confidence.

I only wished he'd inspire some in me as I faced the prospect of telling him that I had not brought his lady author back to New York nor convinced her she should go to Hawleyville for *Focus* magazine.

"And so," I admitted after reviewing my weekend in Laketon, "it doesn't look good."

With that much Herb agreed, but from there on he chose to dissent. Assuming she was sane, Amy could not possibly prefer Laketon, Minnesota, to New York. Nor could Amy have any valid reason for refusing to go to Hawleyville on the *Focus* project.

"The important thing," Herb added, "is that the failure to carry out your plan would embarrass me with Albert Foshay."

If he had considered the possibility that returning to Hawleyville might embarrass Amy, he didn't mention it.

"I might remind you that there's more at stake here than merely publicizing this movie," Herb said. He didn't need to remind me, but he did anyway.

"I told you—and I repeat that this is in the utmost confidence—our people are going to get enough strength to vote Albert Foshay out of control of Foshay Productions. We may not have it at this moment, but we will soon, if we play it right, and the film based on *HOME OF THE HEART* could be our first big money-maker. Lee, if you fall down on this Hawleyville project, Foshay just might be able to use that against us in lining up proxy support. He'd say we don't know the film business and we don't know how to handle publicity. Example: we flubbed our very first attempt to publicize Amy's book.

"See what I mean?"

I did, and more. I also could see the new Lee Medford, "former public relations executive."

"Don't worry, Herb." I always seemed to be telling him not to worry. "I understand."

"That's my boy," he said, accompanying me to the door and throwing his arm around my shoulder in a gesture of confidence and affection that could have cost me a fractured collar bone. Herb was a rough customer, even when he was a friend.

When I got back to the office Dora said Mr. Foshay had called and wanted to see me at eleven the next morning. And she said she wouldn't be in until Monday because she had to have a wisdom tooth pulled. Dora was the only person I ever knew with seven wisdom teeth. I'd kept track.

As I waited in Albert Foshay's outer office, I practiced taking deep breaths because I had the feeling that once I got into the man's presence I no longer would be able to breathe. I'd never seen Foshay, but I'd heard of his cannibalistic reputation for chewing up directors, producers, stars, and vice presidents. Little people, like me, he swallowed whole.

After a while the receptionist said I could go in now, but what I went into was only another reception room, except it was bigger than the first one. It was empty when I entered,

and I was beginning to think they had forgotten about me until a man came through another door and introduced himself as Mr. Foshay's private secretary.

He suggested I make myself comfortable and disappeared, leaving me to resume my deep-breathing and to speculate that the Foshay office was built something like a decompression chamber, with visitors moving from room to room so that when they reached the rarefied air of the president's office they wouldn't get the bends.

While I waited I practiced hyper-ventilating, taking deep breaths and blowing out the air through my mouth, the way we used to do it at summer camp before seeing who could stay under water longest.

Finally, the private secretary to Mr. Foshay came back and ushered me into the movie-maker's private office. My first impression was that he must have died. There were flowers everywhere.

"Mr. Medford," said the secretary, addressing the far corner of the room. Maybe it only seemed that he bowed slightly.

Shrugging off the impulse to curtsy, I peered into the distance and finally focused on a figure sitting at a desk that was nearly covered by a spray of red roses.

"Come in, Mr. Medford." The voice had a froggy quality, only a little more euphonious than a croak.

As I got closer I could see him behind a semi-circular desk that was on a carpeted platform about six inches higher than the rest of the room. He stood up to shake hands and motioned me into a chair that was on the main level. When I sat I was looking up at him, partly because of the platform and partly because the chair was so low.

The carpeting was a deep red, the walls bright yellow, and everywhere there were flowers, in vases, in bowls, in pots, standing on the floor, hanging from the ceiling, and bracketed to the walls.

"Wife's allergic," he said for an opener.

"Oh?"

"Makes her sneeze." With a wave of his hand, he indicated the flowers.

"Oh." I never before had heard of a man hiding from his wife behind a petunia plant.

"Can't have them at home," he added, "so Foshay has them brought in here."

"Oh." It occurred to me that I wasn't exactly holding up my end of the conversation.

"They smell." After every remark he blinked.

"Oh."

"That's what Foshay likes." Blink. "The smell." Blink.

"Very pleasant," I said, trying not to let myself dwell on the thought that I'd never smelled anything like this except in funeral parlors.

"Three hundred and eighteen." He'd lost me again.

"Oh?" I swore that next time I'd say something intelligent.

"In the greenhouse in Southampton there are that many varieties," he added. "Foshay has the finest gardener in the world out there."

"Ah." No real improvement there, but conversationally he didn't leave much of an opening.

"Orchids." Blink. "That's his specialty." Blink. "Hans Flenk. He's a Dutchman. Expensive but worth it."

"The last time I bought orchids I thought it would have been cheaper to grow my own." I had to say something.

"Fourteen dollars and twenty-two cents," he said. "Every orchid Foshay grows costs him that. He likes to know what things cost."

"Doesn't everybody?" I laughed but Foshay didn't.

"No sir." And this time he didn't blink. "Hardly nobody cares what things cost any more. Foshay lives big, spends big, but he knows what it costs. That's the important thing."

They don't understand costs. Not these banker types, they don't."

While he lectured me on the proper way to keep track of a dollar in the movie business I began to understand what Amy had meant about his conversational style. He started in the middle and worked toward either end. His mind, I guessed, was too fast for words so that sometimes he spoke in half sentences, or verbal shorthand. And if that wasn't disconcerting enough, there was his habit of referring to himself in the third person. Every time he mentioned Foshay I was tempted to glance around, half expecting to see someone I hadn't noticed before. Why did he do it? My only guess was that by referring to Albert Foshay in the third person he could speak well of him without feeling immodest.

For a man past seventy, he was alert and vigorous, although part of the impression of vitality probably could be attributed to his frequent, nervous gesture of running his pink and stubby fingers through his thick white hair while he talked. His puffy grey eyes blinking behind thick, black-rimmed and round glasses gave him an owlish look accented by a nose that came close to being a half circle. To emphasize a point, he'd pop his eyelids open or snap them shut, but when they drooped to half-mast he seemed like a wise old bird with a bit of a bun on.

"What's the date?" Now it was my turn to blink. I'd thought we were still slapping down the Wall Street boys. "For getting your author to her home town of Hawleyville for the *Focus* magazine project," he added. While wondering if he'd already had a fill-in from Moline, I tried equivocating.

"The plan hasn't firmed up yet."

"She's not going?" The eyelids flipped up this time.

Numbly, I said "No."

"Why not?" Those grey eyes seemed to be turning a shiny black, and those puffy eyelids were receding into his fore-

head. All the gloss, all the surface charm had vanished. This was Baron Foshay demanding an accounting from one of the serfs.

"For one thing," I said, "she's gun shy. She's had some unfortunate experiences with her publicity program, you know."

"Yes," he said drily, "Foshay was there when it happened, but that's got nothing to do with this Indiana deal."

Having brushed that objection aside, he waited for me to try again.

"She apparently had an unhappy time of it when she lived in Hawleyville, and she's reluctant to stir up old memories. There's an aunt who lives in her house, the old family house; they don't get along." It was odd, even irritating, but I found myself on Amy's side.

Foshay shook his head, then ran both hands through his hair, leaving it in disarray. "Foshay wants this project carried out because he's got a grand idea for a combination publicity program."

He proceeded to tell me how he wanted to hold the finals of the contest to select the unknowns who would play the leading male and female roles in Hawleyville while Amy was there. It was the same plan Moline had outlined to me in Laketon.

"There have been some auditions," he said, "but in Hawleyville we can give the regional winners a chance to take part in the world finals of the greatest talent search in the history of motion pictures." His eyes snapped shut in appreciation of his genius.

"Can't you do that without Amy Neal there?" I asked.

"No." The eyelids flipped open. "Having the author of the novel there gives it added authenticity. She can be one of the judges."

He plucked a wilting petal from a rose on the desk and pitched it into the wastebasket. "Foshay wants her there; she

will be there." In the intensity of his emotion his gibberish vanished, and his straight-from-the-shoulder talk was all too clear. "You go back to Laketon and tell her to read the fine print in her contract with Foshay Productions, the clause that says she will participate as necessary in the promotion of the motion picture. That clause also says that if she fails to do this, Foshay Productions can withhold the second half of its payment for the movie rights to said novel, herein referred to as 'the property.' No Hawleyville, no money."

He stood up and spread his arms wide as evidence that he was a simple, open-handed man. "You see," he said, "it's simple."

It wasn't simple, and he didn't know Amy Neal, and he didn't know me. I wasn't going to threaten, browbeat, or coerce Amy, nor was I going to be a party to cutting her off from the money she'd already earned.

Nor was I going to get into a row with this old owl who, standing up, was almost as wide as he was tall. Looking down at him as he walked with me toward the door, I was surprised to see how much older he now seemed, even a little less foreboding. No wonder he had put his desk on a stage.

At the door he offered me his fleshy hand. "And you might also tell our lady author," he said, "that she owes it to old Albert Foshay to do this little thing that he wants. If Foshay hadn't gotten his hands on that book before publication, it wouldn't be nothing. Nobody would have read it; you'd never have heard of it. Albert Foshay made that book. Who told Owen Boice that it would be a best seller? Albert Foshay told him, Albert Foshay put up most of the promotion money, Albert Foshay mapped out the advertising, Albert Foshay directed the publicity, the cocktail parties, the newspaper interviews, the exposure on television and radio. All of it, Albert Foshay. Without him there'd be no best seller. You tell her that."

He let go of my hand. "You'll tell her?"

"Yes," I said, meaning "No."

As the elevator took me back toward the world of human people, I had a curious thought. Of all those I had met who were connected with HOME OF THE HEART, only one did not take sole credit for its success.

Only Amy Neal.

Chapter 8

AFTER talking to Gardner and Foshay there was only one wise move I could make and that was to head back to Laketon for another try at changing Amy Neal's mind. I knew that was exactly what I should do.

So I stayed in New York.

Somehow I convinced myself that Amy needed a cooling-off period. A few more days to think things over might give her a new perspective. After a return to the Laketon routine, the dirty clothes, the pots and pans, the grocery shopping, and the Cub Scouts, Amy might see things differently. A few more days of poodle chasing and listening to Old Jug Ears "whupsing" around the house might make a trip to Hawleyville seem as inviting as a Mediterranean cruise.

Anyway, I had something else on tap for the weekend. Her name is Sandy.

She's someone you see on television shows made in Hollywood fairly often, so I won't tell you her real name, but with-

out being a cad I can say that she's brunette, statistically stunning, cute, and uninhibited. On top of all that she has a wild sense of humor.

"With me you can laugh and have fun at the same time," she said soon after we met. It was true too.

"Arriving Idlewild American seven fifteen PM Friday," said the telegram I found at the apartment that evening after the interview with Albert Foshay. It meant only one thing—Foshay, Herb Gardner, Frankie Moline, Amy Neal, and all the rest of them would have to wait. I'm one who answers when opportunity knocks.

With a fresh shave and a lusty gleam in the eye, I was waiting for Sandy when her plane arrived, and in my hurry I was helping her into a cab before I even thought about her luggage.

"What luggage?" she asked. "For a weekend with Lee Medford, who needs clothes?"

Turned out she was right about that, too.

That's why it was the next Tuesday before I got back to Laketon where I found Amy conferring with a lawyer about her income tax. The Internal Revenue Service had disallowed some of the deductions she had made on the advice of the same attorney. She was not happy with him.

"I don't know why you're here, but have a chair in the living room," she told me. "I'll get to you as soon as I dispose of the U.S. government."

She disappeared into the kitchen where the lawyer had his papers spread out on the table, and before she slammed the door I heard him say, "I think we can settle this for around seven thousand dollars."

The first thing I did after Amy left me alone was to go to the bookshelves and look for *HOME OF THE HEART*. There it was, tucked in between Maupassant and O'Hara.

And who had told her to get it out of the bedroom and into the living room? If I could convince her of that, perhaps I

could make her see that she ought to go to Hawleyville. While I waited I kept turning that thought over and over until, by the time the lawyer left, I had endowed myself with powers of persuasion that rivaled those of the football players who sell hair tonic on television. Or even Jinx Falkenberg.

Bursting with all this talent, I waited impatiently while she saw the lawyer to the door, and then before I could get in a word the telephone rang. She didn't say much, but her tone was enough to lower the temperature by several degrees for blocks. At first I didn't get the drift because all she was saying was "I see" or "Is that so?" Finally, she said, calmly and slowly but with frost forming on each syllable, "I see, and if the contract is void, that means there will be no movie." She hung up without saying good-bye.

For a moment she sat there in the hall, staring at the phone, and I sat in the living room, studying my shoe laces and wondering how I was going to explain this. Someone, it was obvious, had telephoned to tell her that the rest of the movie money would be held up if she didn't go to Hawleyville.

When she came into the living room she said nothing, just looked. Loathing would be a little too strong a word for what I saw; distaste would be closer, along with a touch of nausea, and maybe even some disappointment.

"I'm sorry," I said, standing up. With an effort, I managed to keep looking her in the eye.

"Why should you be?" Her voice was hard. "You didn't do anything; you let someone else do the dirty work."

"What?" I was sorry, but now I was annoyed, too.

"Don't 'what' me please." She sat on the arm of a chair. "You know who called and what he had to say."

"I suppose you're talking about the movie contract." I went over and peered out the window; she'd stared me down. "But I don't know who called. Was it Frankie Moline?"

"Yes." A little of the bite was gone from her voice. "He said Mr. Foshay asked you nearly a week ago to tell me that I had to go to Hawleyville if I wanted the rest of the movie money."

I nodded and said nothing.

"So," she said, "you didn't have the nerve to pull this legalized blackmail yourself; you let Frankie Moline do it."

"Wrong again." I whirled around to face her. "I didn't intend to tell you at all, but, instead, to persuade you to accept this Hawleyville project on its merits. I'm not a shakedown artist, and, as much as I want you to go to Hawleyville, I'm not going to twist your arm or threaten you."

With her fingers she massaged her forehead along the hair-line for a moment before she said, "All right, I'm sorry. I believe you."

I gave her a cigarette and lighted it while telling her the idea to withhold the movie money was not mine.

Surprisingly, she laughed. "Don't worry. I thought they might try something like that, so I read the contract, too. There's another clause that says they can't make the movie until I get all my money. I don't think they want me to go to Hawleyville that bad. The bastards." Suddenly, she turned sour again.

"Maybe they are," I conceded, "but actually, you know, Foshay's enthusiasm for your novel has had some part in its success. You might want to remember that."

"I know." She crossed the room and sat on a ladder-back chair beside the fireplace. "I'm being unfair, especially to you. Maybe it's because I've had a bad morning. While I was still eating breakfast I was served with the papers in a suit charging plagiarism. Some man in Mississippi says he wrote the plot for *HOME OF THE HEART* in a short story twenty years ago. It is supposed to have been printed in a little magazine somewhere, and I'm accused of lifting it. He wants fifty thousand dollars."

"That's a shame." She did have her troubles.

"And that's only part of what happened to me," she continued. "That lawyer who just left says I'll have to pay thousands more on last year's income tax. Of course he's the one who made out my return and took the deductions they now have disallowed. And in addition to the money I have to pay the government there'll be another nice fee for him."

She looked so disheartened that I offered to take her to lunch. "Come on, a couple of cocktails can make all this seem of no importance."

"All right, just so I get back in time to pick up Randy at school," she said. "Arthur's out of town on a trip; so I don't have to worry much about dinner. Randy and I aren't big eaters."

Maybe Randy wasn't, but after two martinis Amy did away with an enormous slice of roast beef we had at a country place a couple of miles west of Minneapolis. Her buoyant manner had returned, and while we were having coffee I asked:

"What's the real reason you don't want to go to Hawleyville?"

"Simple. I hate the place."

"But," I said, "it is the scene of your novel, isn't it?"

"More or less." She nodded.

"You don't seem to hate it in the book," I pointed out.

"I don't really hate the town." She smiled. "Just the people."

"Really?" I didn't believe her because she was still smiling.

"No, that's not true either." With the handle of a spoon she began tracing a design on the table cloth. "Just a few people, or one in particular. I had some unhappy experiences before I left there, and I don't want to revive them."

"A love affair?"

She laughed. "My, you are the nosy one. No, it had nothing

to do with romantic love. It was a lack of love, between me and my aunt. I think I told you she brought me up. If I go back there I'll have to see her, and I don't want to do that."

"Maybe," I suggested, "we could arrange to send your aunt on a trip while you're there. If that's all that's holding you up, Foshay would put up the money to send her to Europe."

Amy laughed so hard she dropped the spoon on the floor.

"What's so funny?"

"My aunt in Europe." Amy was still laughing. "She's never been anywhere; she doesn't want to go anywhere. She went to Indianapolis once, but she didn't like it. Too many strangers."

"Well," I wasn't convinced, "I should think you could endure a few minutes, or even hours, with your aunt in order to make more money for the book and the movie."

"You don't know my Aunt Charlotte," Amy said. "At least ten thousand times she said she wanted to be a mother to me. Holy Moley! She was no mother; she was a warden. In nine years she never willingly let me do anything I wanted to do, and not once did I ever do anything that pleased her. I was just a burden she had to bear, and she made no secret of it either. While my father was around to take my side I was able to put up with her, but after he died I didn't have a chance. I couldn't go out with boys; I couldn't even read in bed after ten o'clock. But I did a fine job of washing the dishes and scrubbing the floors while dear Old Aunt Charlotte played cards with her friends in the living room."

I had another thought. "Of course if you went back to Hawleyville, there's no law that says you'd *have* to go see your aunt. Just stay away from her."

With another spoon Amy was tracing an intricate pattern on the tablecloth. "Hawleyville isn't that big, and anyway I couldn't be that rude, even to her. And there's another rea-

son. Some people in Hawleyville don't like the book, according to what I hear from there. They think I was making fun of the town, and of them, and they're pretty darn mad about it."

"But you weren't," I protested. "The over-all impression I got from the book was one of affection for the town and the people in it. Mostly, you were very gentle with your characters."

Amy nodded, and with a slight smile, said, "Mostly, but not entirely. I tried to write an honest book, and no community is perfect. A few got sore, and I don't want to inflame them further by showing up there now in person, just for the purpose of promoting the book."

It all sounded logical, and yet somehow I knew there was something more. From what I had seen of Amy Neal, I was sure it would take more than an ill-tempered relative or a few soreheads to keep her away from Hawleyville, if she wanted to go there.

"All right," I said with a big smile so I could back down if she was offended, "what's the *real* reason?"

She took a sip of coffee, she looked out the window, and she carefully smoothed the tablecloth with the palm of her hand before she said, "Taradiddle."

"I don't understand."

"Of course not," she said. "You wouldn't understand and neither would Mr. Foshay. Or Frankie Moline, or George Schaffer, or any of them. But that's what going back to Hawleyville would be for me, strictly taradiddle. I'd have to say how much I missed it, what a wonderful time I had living there, how I enjoyed running through the leaves in the fall and rolling snowballs in the winter. For the photographers I'd have to sit in the church pew where I listened to all those god-awful sermons, and I'd have to visit the soda fountain where I worked one summer, without ever mention-

ing that I quit because the proprietor kept sneaking up behind me. He had clammy hands."

She pushed the coffee aside so she could rest her arms on the table and leaned toward me so she could speak softly. "It all would be deception, flim-flam, hokum. It wouldn't be true—I just couldn't speak the truth. For one thing they wouldn't print it. And they'd want me to visit my father's grave. That would be the worst of all because on his headstone are carved these words: 'Speak the truth and shame the devil.' That's from Rabelais, and it was his favorite. It sums up what he stood for; maybe it wasn't much and I can't see that it ever did him any good, but it was his touchstone, and I respected him for it. I admired him, too, and somehow a little of this rubbed off on me. 'Great is truth and mighty above all things.' That's from Revelations, and it was another of his favorites."

For the first time, I felt I was beginning to understand Amy Neal.

"I suppose it sounds silly, maybe fanatical," Amy said, "but it was the way he lived, and it's the way I'd like to live too, if I could. Can you understand, Lee? I can't go back there and stand at his grave saying things for publication that I don't believe. Doing that would be repudiating him; don't you see? I wish I could do it—because it would be easier than fighting you and Mr. Foshay and all the others—but I just can't, not there.

"It's a kind of dishonesty I can't commit, not any more than I could write a book about Hawleyville that was all sunshine and roses, without the thunderstorms or the thorns. I made some people angry with the book, and I know I'm making a lot of people angry now, including you."

"No, Amy, I'm not angry." Right then I wasn't either, but I was puzzled, and I told her so.

"I respect your feelings, but not your judgment," I said.

"It's true that there's a great grey area between the real truth and outright dishonesty. You call it taradiddle. Some call it moderation, compromise, or whatever. Amy, you can't cope with life by dealing only in blacks and whites for the reason that our society operates in the middle ground. What you call taradiddle is the grease that keeps life flowing. It's our *modus vivendi*. True, there are varying amounts of dishonesty in all of us—in the status seekers, the pretenders, the show-offs, the climbers in the business world, the sellers, the advertisers, the politicians, and so on. Everywhere you look there's a touch of dishonesty: on the country club golf course where maybe half the players are more interested in making business and social contacts than they are in breaking par; at the bars where martinis are gulped down by persons who loathe them but recognize them as a status symbol of the 'in' group; at the office where the eager beavers cultivate persons they detest in order to further their careers; at the churches where part of the congregation is there because in their community religion happens to be 'big' right now."

She really had me wound up. "Take *HOME OF THE HEART* as an example," I continued. "How many thousands of persons, do you suppose, have bought a copy—not because they wanted to read it, nor not because they expected to enjoy it, nor not because they felt they would be enriched by it—but simply because *HOME OF THE HEART* is the 'in' book this year? The taste makers say read it, so *everybody* is reading it, or pretending to read it. Buying the book just for show is pure taradiddle, but are you against that? Do you want to refund the purchase price to every dishonest person who owns an unread copy?"

"Well . . ." I cut her off because I was determined to finish what I had started.

"Dishonesty, in its milder forms, is our warp and woof. We couldn't live without it.

"We all have our personal Hawleyvilles. The difference is that the rest of us are willing to accept them."

"Will you say that again please?" She seemed confused.

"Some other day," I promised.

Some day, I thought, after I understand it well enough myself.

Chapter 9

As we drove back to Laketon I had a feeling that I'd made some progress. Not that Amy had eased her anti-Hawleyville stand, but now that I understood her better I had the idea I might be able to find the key to getting around her, to winning her over to the *Focus* magazine project, after all. It would take some time, and I would have to stay in Laketon. The immediate need was for an excuse to remain, and Amy herself gave me the opening I wanted when she asked if I would stop at the post office to help her pick up her mail. It took both of us to carry the stuff out to the car.

"Holy Moley!" she said. "How'm I ever going to answer all this? Owen Boice and Company forwards everything that's addressed to me, and I have stacks of letters I haven't even opened. I work at answering every letter, but I never seem to get anywhere." She pronounced it "any-ware."

"How about using me for an assistant?" I asked. "I can

dictate faster than anyone. Ask my secretary. And I'm supposed to be helping you with your public relations. What's better for your image than answering the mail from your fans?"

"But I don't have anyone to dictate to," Amy said. "No secretary."

"Don't worry," I told her, "I'll get a tape recorder and be at your house in the morning, with a stenographer. We can take turns on the machine while the girl types."

I dropped her off and drove away before she could think of a reason to object.

By nine o'clock I had the tape recorder set up in the living room and the stenographer sitting at the typewriter on the kitchen table.

The first letter Amy handed me was from Burlington, Iowa, and it said:

Dear Miss Neal:

I am a junior in high school and my father won't let me stay out after eleven o'clock. He says that if I get an "A" on my English composition term paper, I can stay out until midnight on weekends. I wonder if you will be kind enough to write one for me. If you wrote it I might get an "A" because my teacher says you are the best writer in America today. You can pick any topic you wish, but it has to be at least a thousand words. I know that sounds like an awful lot of words, but someone as talented as you are should be able to do that in a few minutes.

Sincerely,
Barbara Barry

P.S. It has to be handed in by next Friday.

My reply was short.

"Dear Barbara," I dictated, "I am flattered that you se-

lected me out of all the living American authors to write your English composition for you. It is with great regret that I must decline because of other commitments. However, I am sure you will have no trouble in finding another writer who will be happy to accommodate you. Have you tried John Steinbeck? I understand he writes excellent term papers. With all good wishes, Sincerely, Amy Neal."

The next one was from Columbus, Ohio, and it said:

Dear Miss Neal:

This is the first letter I ever wrote to an author, but I feel I simply must tell you how much I enjoyed your book. Carole, your heroine, is terribly true to life. I know this because she is exactly like me, shy but intelligent. We even have the same color eyes. Please forgive me for taking up your time, but I did want you to know I enjoyed your book. I really did.

Jane (Mrs. John) Smith

"Dear Mrs. Smith," I dictated. "Thank you for your kind and thoughtful letter about my novel. It was wonderful of you to take the time to write, and I can tell you that it is encouragement such as yours that makes a writer's life stimulating and worthwhile. With all good wishes, Sincerely, Amy Neal."

The third letter was from St. Petersburg, Florida, and it read:

Dear Miss Neal:

This is the first letter I ever wrote to an author, but I can't help telling you that your character Carole is not true to life at all. If she were like a real girl she would have gone to bed with Peter in chapter five. A very close friend of mine had to make this same choice, and she

did just the opposite of Carole. It was great. I just thought you ought to know. Very truly yours,

Mary York (age 16)

P.S. Only his name was not Peter. It was Harry.

I hadn't realized that this letter answering was going to be so much fun.

"Dear Mary," I told the tape recorder. "Thank you for your interesting comments about my novel. It was kind and thoughtful of you to write because a writer can grow and mature only by keeping in touch with her readers. I think your criticism is valid, and it is quite possible that if the boy had been named Harry instead of Peter the outcome would have been different. With all good wishes, Sincerely, Amy Neal."

The next one was short and punchy. It said:

Dear Miss Neal:

Your portrayal of Charlie Cooper as the town drunk in your alleged novel is an obvious libel and slander of my grandfather of the same name. My grandfather never drank a drop in his life. I am referring this matter to my attorney.

Amy said she'd add that one to the stack that was to go to her lawyers. "They've already got a bundle of these," she said. "I seem to have libeled everybody but Herbert Hoover and Bernard Baruch."

Choosing at random, I drew a letter from the Sunshine Island Development Corp., which said:

Dear Miss Neal:

This is the first letter I ever wrote to an author, but please allow me to congratulate you on your splendid novel. With the wonderful success you have had, it

occurs to me that you may be looking for an investment opportunity. May I invite your attention to Sunshine . . .

That one I threw away.

Amy's next correspondent was George Reader, of San Francisco, who wrote:

Dear Amy:

Remember me? I'm the handsome fellow who sat behind you in fourth grade. I often wonder about the old crowd back there at the Carrington school in Hawleyville, and believe me I was really surprised to find that you have written a book. Frankly, I hadn't figured you as the literary type. I had thought of you more as a candidate for Miss America. Believe me I had a real crush on you back there in the fourth grade. Amy, I wonder if you would do me a little favor. I've been telling the fellows around the club that I knew Amy Neal way back when and frankly some of them don't believe it. I wonder if you would be kind enough—just for old times' sake—to send me an autographed copy of your book that I could show to the fellows. You might write something like: 'To Harry Reader, my first love.' You know, something personal like. The gang would get a bang out of that. Actually, Amy, I haven't read your book yet, but I'm on the waiting list at the library. Love and kisses from your old boy friend, Harry.

"I kind of remember him," said Amy. "He had a runny nose."

Into the machine I dictated:

"Darling Harry: My, you certainly bring back old memories. We did have a ball back there in the fourth grade, didn't we? I'm sorry that all my personal copies of HOME

OF THE HEART have been distributed. I'll always remember my first love, good old Harry. Sincerely, Amy Neal."

"He'll have that photostated and passed out to all the gang at the next club meeting," I predicted, picking up the next letter which was from a man in Pekin, Illinois who wanted his money back because two of the pages in his copy were stuck together.

Before I could deal with him the phone rang and Amy asked me to answer it.

"This is Carl Nelson at the *Tribune*," said the caller. "May I speak to Mrs. Phillips please?"

"She's busy right now," I said, "can I help you. I'm Lee Medford, her public relations representative."

"Well yes, I guess you could at that," said Nelson. He sounded a little relieved at the prospect of dealing with an intermediary.

"We just received on the wire a United Press International dispatch from Hawleyville, Indiana, and we would like Mrs. Phillips to comment on it, if she wishes."

"What does it say?"

"It's fairly long," he said, "but I'll give you the gist of it. It's about an editorial that appears today in the Hawleyville *Argus*."

"The editorial says that *Focus* magazine plans to bring Amy Neal—Mrs. Phillips—back to Hawleyville for a picture story on scenes in her hometown that inspired parts of her novel."

I wondered how they found that out in Hawleyville, but I had no inkling of what was to come.

"The editorial says she won't be welcome in Hawleyville," said Nelson. He paused to clear his throat. "It says in part, and I quote:

"'Amy Neal have you no conscience? Can you even think of returning to the city you have maligned so shamefully? Do you think you could face your former neighbors after

repaying past kindnesses with libel and slander? Do you think anyone will welcome you here?

"This is our message Amy Neal: Stay away from Hawleyville. We don't want you. Or any New York photographers either. You have done enough damage already to the finest little city in the county. We don't want you perpetuating the canard that Hawleyville was the scene of your vile novel, which is offensive to all good people everywhere. We repeat: Stay away, Amy Neal.'

"There's more along the same line," said Nelson. "Then it winds up by saying, and I quote again:

"'Of course Hawleyville does not need to fear a visit from this character assassin. From hundreds of miles away she casts her slurs and slanders, hiding behind the pretense that she is writing fiction, but the *Argus* can safely predict that Amy Neal will never come within miles of Hawleyville. She doesn't dare.'

Whew! The *Argus* editor might not have much literary style, but he could make a point.

"I'll talk to Mrs. Phillips and see if she wants to comment," I said. "If she does, I'll call you back."

That showed how little I still knew about Amy Neal.

Reading from the notes I had taken, I told Amy the whole story and watched her progress from a slow burn, to a sizzle, to an explosion.

"Do I have a statement?" she shouted, "I'll say I have." She jumped up and marched toward the phone.

"Amy, wait a minute." I grabbed her arm, but she jerked free. "We ought to talk this over, Amy. Let's get it down on paper and see how it looks before you say anything for publication. You may be sorry, Amy. You'll regret it later, Amy, you . . ."

I was talking to the back of her head, and she was dialing the paper.

When Nelson came on the phone I was still holding my breath, but she suddenly turned ever so polite.

"Yes I do have a statement, Mr. Nelson," she said, "and this is it: HOME OF THE HEART does not slander the town of Hawleyville nor anyone in it, and I am not intimidated. I am going to Hawleyville for the *Focus* magazine photographs as planned."

She hung up, and when she turned and looked at me all I could say was: "Well I'll be damned."

Here was what I had been after all along and now that it had happened I didn't even feel elated. Instead, I felt a vague uneasiness.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" I asked.

"Yes." Her voice was soft, but her eyes were burning. "Will you and Miss Whatsis please leave. I think I'm going to have a tantrum. You know, swear and throw things."

We went, but all the way into Minneapolis I worried, and as soon as I got to the hotel I phoned her.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Sure," she said, "I'm fine."

"You seemed pretty upset when we left," I remarked.

She laughed. "All I threw around was one of Arthur's smaller loving cups. I kind of busted it up, but he'll never miss it. I feel better now, and I hope you'll forgive me for being rude."

After I had promised to return the next day for another session with her correspondents I called Walter Driscoll in New York.

"Amy Neal is going to Hawleyville." I thought I was dropping a bomb.

"Hah," he chortled. "I knew she'd take the bait."

"Bait?" Sometimes I'm slow to catch on. "You mean you know about the Hawleyville editorial?"

"Know about it!" He was bursting with self acclaim. "Hell fire, Moline and I set it up. I practically wrote it."

"Set it up?"

"Yeah. We didn't cut you in because we figured you wouldn't go for it, might even louse it up. It was easy, my friend, just elementary psychology. First we slipped the word to the editor of the Hawleyville *Argus* that we were bringing Amy down there to take pictures. I fanned the flames a little by telling him I hoped there wouldn't be any opposition from him. Opposition. Hah, he blew a gasket. Then I sort of fed him his punch line by saying that if he objected editorially I was afraid Amy would be scared off and the project ruined. That country editor doesn't know it himself, but his editorial was just about what I suggested—in my devious way, of course. I guess I kind of inspired him by saying that Amy was so much in the news these days that if he wrote a real hot editorial it probably would get picked up by the wire services and distributed all over the country. With his name and all, you know. He leaped at the opportunity to become another William Allen White. Oh boy."

From twelve hundred miles away, I could see Walter gloating.

"Then," he continued, "I made sure it was called to the attention of UPI, and they fired it straight up to Minneapolis, as I expected. So Amy had to react—just as I knew she would. Nobody is going to push Amy Neal around. She'll show 'em. So we're all set, Lee, and now we can make the final arrangements. You know, Lee, I'm wasting my time here at *Focus*; with a talent like mine I ought to be in public relations."

"You really should," I told him, "because you've got the No. 1 basic qualification—you're a complete son-of-a-bitch."

Walter was still laughing when I hung up, reflecting on the state of a society where no matter how hard you try you can't insult anyone any more.

Chapter 10

THE next morning I returned to Laketon with the stenographer and a determination to devise a more efficient system for the handling of Amy's mail before her living room began to look like the dead letter office.

First I sat down at the tape recorder and dictated two form letters, one to go to readers who liked the book and one to those who didn't. Then we began sorting the letters into categories and throwing them into cardboard boxes I had found in the basement. The boxes we labeled "Favorable," "Unfavorable," "Personal," "Legal," "Unclassified," and "Discard."

In our assembly line the stenographer ripped open the envelopes and passed them to me for distribution into the boxes. Those on the borderline I passed to Amy for a final decision. It was agreed that all sales letters should go into the "Discard" box. All those threatening suits for plagiarism, libel, or slander went into the "Legal" box. So did anything

that looked like a manuscript, for eventual return to the sender, unopened. "The lawyers insist on it," Amy said, "so that when and if I write another novel I won't be accused of stealing the plot." She dumped two battered packages into the "Legal" box while she was telling me about it.

The next letter was from a woman in Newark, New Jersey who said she was sending under separate cover the manuscript of her novel that she would like to have Amy touch up here and there. In return, the woman said, she would mention Amy favorably in a foreword and share with her five per cent of all future royalties up to ten thousand dollars.

"This manuscript has been rejected by seventeen publishers because it lacks a rape scene which I am unable to write because of unfamiliarity with the subject," the woman wrote. "I will appreciate it if you will write in such a scene."

"Thanks for the compliment," said Amy, tossing the letter into the "Unclassified" box which filled up fast but not as fast as the "Discard" box that I had to empty three times before noon.

Shortly after noon we had opened and sorted all but one bundle, and Amy said she could do that herself. I arranged for the stenographer to come back the next day to work on the form letters, and then I said I had to get back to New York to start making arrangements for the Hawleyville trip with Walter Driscoll. Mostly, I wanted to find out what Driscoll and Moline might be up to. For all I knew, they might have maneuvered me out of the promotion of **HOME OF THE HEART**.

"You sure you don't want to change your mind about Hawleyville?" I asked Amy on the way out. "If you do, this is the time for it."

"No. I said I'd be there, and I will. Just let me know the date."

Everything was working out just fine, but all the way into Minneapolis and all the way back to the airport I was pre-

occupied with a vague uneasiness, and with inexplicable, disconnected wisps of apprehension that I finally had to acknowledge and to recognize. I was anxious about the reception Amy might get in Hawleyville.

Instead of taking the plane to New York, I got another flight to Chicago with a connection for Indianapolis, where I rented a car for the drive of sixty miles or so to Hawleyville.

I was leaving the flat miles of cornfields and entering some gently rolling country when I passed the sign that said, "Welcome to Hawleyville, Pop. 10,046." The city fathers had moved the town limits well out into the country, and there were no buildings at all until, on a knoll to my left, I saw a massive pile of stone in the style of an old English manor house, and as I drove nearer I got the eerie notion that I had seen it before, although that was impossible because this was my first trip into Indiana. As I passed the entrance drive I slowed down to read the marker on the gatepost that said, "Hawleyville Country Club."

That was no help, but I could still see the house, and the bizarre impression that I had been here before intensified as my attention narrowed to the details, such as the five turrets, the massive chimneys at either end. Even the snake-like drive from the road to the house was known to me, and when I remembered that there had been but a single gate post I suddenly understood why the house was familiar. That was the home of the Winstons, the most powerful family in HOME OF THE HEART.

This transmutation of a scene from Amy's novel into the realities of the present seemed to aggravate my misgivings over her impending visit to Hawleyville, and when I reached the center of town I stopped so short the car behind nearly rammed me. Here was HOME OF THE HEART in all its dimensions, as it had been sharply etched on page after page of uncompromising realism.

The focal point was the courthouse in the center of the town square, as it had been in Amy's fictional city of Oakland. The streets on all four sides of the courthouse were lined with the buildings that I had seen before in all their authenticity. I didn't have to look for the hotel; I knew exactly where it would be, on the southwest corner across from the courthouse.

I found a place to leave the car, in front of the old horse-watering trough which now was unused except for the parking meters fastened to each end. As I got my bag from the car, a man in a straw hat sauntered past, and I wondered if I only thought I knew him. The feeling of having dropped in for the first time on a familiar place was uncanny, disquieting.

I stood on the curb a moment looking across the street at the hotel, a four-story, ancient building of worn brick that had been painted brown. Momentarily mesmerized by the intertwining of fact and fiction, I was puzzled by the name, "Prairie Inn," painted in black across the front because in its literary incarnation it had been the "Holly House," and, as I remembered, it had places where the paint had peeled, revealing a gray layer underneath. I found myself searching the walls of the Prairie Inn for such evidence of its weird metamorphosis from image to actuality, and there on the north side I saw the gray splotches in the muddy brown.

In the lobby of the Prairie Inn I noticed the faint musty odor that had pervaded the Holly House, but I wasn't certain whether it was real or imagined. The clerk gave me a room on the third floor and said I either could take my own bag up or wait a few minutes until he personally could carry it up for me. "I can't leave the desk and the telephone until the manager gets back from supper," he explained.

I told him I could make out by myself but with the key in the lock I hesitated, recalling a scene from HOME OF THE

HEART between Hack Winston and the girl, Carole, in a room of the Holly House.

There had been a double brass bed, window sills only a couple of feet off the floor, a rope coiled beneath them for use in case of fire, a dresser with a crisp, white covering, a battered writing desk, soiled by the rings of damp glasses all around the Gideon Bible. And on the back of the door there had been a card saying, "Stop! Have you forgotten anything?" Opening the door, I went inside, and the first object I saw was the brass bed. Second was the rope coiled under the window sills that were two feet off the floor. The Gideon Bible was atop the writing desk amidst the rings left by the glasses, and behind me on the door hung the sign saying, "Stop! Have you forgotten anything?"

As I sat on the edge of the bed, I wondered how Amy Neal had acquired such intimate knowledge of the interior of the Prairie Inn, but it was a thought that I did not allow myself to dwell upon. I didn't really want to know.

It was getting dark, but standing there at the window in the gathering gloom I could make out some of the landmarks that I knew I would find across the square—the hardware store where Carole had worked the summer before she married, the bank on the corner that was owned by the Winston family and was the scene of the incident that had forced Hack Winston to leave town for a while.

Across the street from the bank, to the northeast of the courthouse, was the biggest building in town—in **HOME OF THE HEART** that would be the five-story Winston Building, which housed the offices of the Winston Coal Company, the Winston Farm Real Estate Company, and the Winston Seed and Grain Company. The Winstons were very big in Oakland. I wondered what their name was in Hawleyville, and without stopping to unpack my bag I went diagonally across the courthouse park to find out.

It was Damen.

The Damen Building had the Damen Coal Company on the first floor, but the space was now shared by the Damen Mortgage & Loan Company. From the building director beside the front door I learned that the Damen Farm Real Estate Company was on the second floor and the Damen Seed and Grain Company on the third. Doctors, dentists, and lawyers seemed to have the rest of the space.

With my intimate knowledge of the town of Oakland, I was able to walk directly to the office of the *Hawleyville Argus* on the corner northwest of the courthouse. It was closed, but I intended to stay in Hawleyville until I could see Ed Keating, the editor who had been mouse-trapped by a couple of wiseacres named Driscoll and Moline into writing that anti-Amy editorial.

As I walked on around the square I passed the funeral home and the drug store that had figured in *HOME OF THE HEART*. I wondered if that was the store where Amy had worked for the man with the clammy hands and if he were the druggist named Roger Hitchcock, who, in the book, had done a stretch in the Atlanta prison for selling bootleg liquor during prohibition.

Still fascinated by the mixture of fact and fantasy, I walked back to the hotel and asked the clerk if the dining room was open.

"It ain't been open for years," he said. "We recommend the Hi-Lo restaurant, two doors down around the corner on Damen Street."

When I saw the glass and chrome front of the Hi-Lo I knew I'd been there before, too, courtesy of Amy Neal. Only then it was "Jenny's Cafe."

Inside it was exactly as I knew it would be—a counter with stools all the way along the left side and booths along the right. Down the middle there was a single row of tables. I took one of the booths, and when the waitress came over I said I'd have a Scotch on the rocks, and she said what's

that, and I said whiskey, and she said we don't serve liquor here, and I said where do they, and she said no place, and I said no wonder Amy doesn't want to come back. Only, the last part I didn't say out loud.

So I had the pork tenderloin platter with French fries and watched the counter man as he served customers on the stools across the room. He, too, was someone I knew from somewhere. Not only his face was familiar but so were his gestures and the way he kept describing everything as "zig-gety"—it was a "ziggety" day he remarked after assuring a patron that the roast chicken was "real ziggety." And when he began picking his teeth with his tongue I placed him. That was "Creeps" Cramer, the football star in *HOME OF THE HEART*.

When the waitress came back I asked her the name of the man working on the counter.

"Him?" She turned and looked, as if she hadn't noticed anyone there before. "Oh that's Nat Crowe. You know him?"

"No, only I thought I saw him play football once."

"Maybe you did," she said. "He was supposed to be pretty hot stuff when he was on the high school team. I never seen him play though; he's older'n me."

Oh boy, I was beginning to see *HOME OF THE HEART* in a new light. If Amy had written about the population of Hawleyville with the same devotion to realism and detail that she had lavished on her setting, no wonder she had made some enemies. How long, I wondered, before they start suing?

I wanted to wander around town talking to people who might remember Amy. Mostly, I wanted to know if the *Argus* editorial reflected the general opinion.

Nat Crowe, or "Creeps" Cramer, was someone who must know her, and, since she had treated him favorably in the book, I walked over by the counter as I was leaving and asked where you could get a drink.

"Only wine and beer across the bar," he said, "unless you belong to a club. If you'll settle for a beer, try the Shanghai Lounge, two doors down on your left."

I asked him how come you couldn't buy whiskey, and by the time he finished telling me what the temperance crowd had done to Hawleyville we were old enough friends for me to ask him if he knew Amy Neal.

"Ziggety yes," he said, his eyes popping wide open. "You a friend of hers?"

When I told him I had come to Hawleyville straight from her home he shook his head in amazement. "How the ziggety is she?" he asked.

I told him and said that she might be visiting Hawleyville soon in connection with her novel.

"So Amy wrote herself a book," Nat said approvingly. "I heard she made a barrel of money. You know, I ain't read it, but I been told there's a character in there that's something like me. Amy was a real ziggety kid when we were in high school together. Only thing wrong with her was she was too smart, made all the rest of us look like dopes, but we didn't mind because she was so full of laughs. And pretty! Ziggety but I'd like to see her again. All of us guys were crazy about her in high school, but it didn't do us no good, account she never went out with boys. She had a cranky old mother."

"Aunt," I corrected him.

"Yeah, I remember. An aunt." He nodded. "She still lives up there in the house where Amy lived, I guess. Summer nights a bunch of us used to walk up and down in front of Amy's house, whistling for her to come out, but she never got any further than the porch. Then her aunt would haul her back into the house. Is she still all that pretty?"

I assured him she was, and he said that when I saw Amy to tell her to drop into the Hi-Lo and Nat Crowe would see to it that she got a ziggety meal on the house.

Thus encouraged, I took my public opinion survey down the street to the Shanghai Lounge where I found an elderly gentleman named Iggy Kelly tending bar. He didn't know Amy, but he remembered her father.

"Fine fellow he was too," Iggy recalled. "Ran a little jewelry store and watch repair shop. He was prominent in the Elks."

I asked him how he liked Amy's book.

"Never read it," he said, "but there's a lot of talk about it around here. Ed Keating over at the paper seems to think Amy Neal ought to be lynched."

"What's your opinion?" I felt like Elmo Roper.

"No opinion," he said. "A bartender has to be neutral, on everything."

Apparently having decided I was too nosy, Iggy busied himself washing glasses. The only other customer was at the far end of the bar, and after glancing his way I again got that eerie feeling of knowing someone I'd never seen before. He needed a shave, and the frazzled ends of his hair hung over his collar. I tried putting him into HOME OF THE HEART, but he didn't fit until, without warning, he slid off the barstool backwards and landed on the floor, with a plop.

"Charlie Cooper," I muttered and went over to help pick him up. This was Amy's town drunk.

He didn't seem to be hurt, and I helped him back onto the stool.

"Tom Fredericks, I'm telling you for the last time," said the bartender, "if you fall off that stool once more you're out. No more Shanghai Lounge for you."

"That's the third time today," Iggy said to me.

"Thank you very much," said Tom. "They don't make these stools like they used to. Gimme another, Iggy."

The bartender brought him a glass of sherry with a beer chaser.

"This gentleman was asking about Amy Neal," he said to

Tom, who looked at me through watery, bloodshot eyes, as if trying to remember.

"Nice little kid," he said finally. "Pretty little thing, too, but she always looks so sad."

"I'm afraid that's not the Amy Neal I'm talking about," I said.

"Sure it is." Tom was definite. "Her father has the jewelry store. I play cards with him at the Elks club."

"Look Tom," Iggy said, "Mr. Neal has been dead for over fifteen years."

"No kidding?" Tom shook his head. "He plays cards pretty good."

I said good night to Tom and Iggy and went back to the hotel, having decided to postpone my research until morning and also to make it a little more systematic, so I wouldn't be wasting time on such as Tom Fredericks, who had lost the last fifteen years.

In the morning I went to breakfast at Fred's Chop House across the square from the hotel. The waitress never had heard of Amy Neal, but the proprietor knew her.

"She went to high school with my daughter," he recalled. "She was around the house a few times. Kind of a quiet, withdrawn kid as I remember her. But that book of hers is really good. I got a big kick out of it. A lot of those characters are walking the streets right out here." He pointed out the window.

"Is that so?" Now I was getting somewhere. "Such as?"

"There's the whole Damen family," he said. "Phil Damen is the only one still living here, though. He's got an apartment out at the country club which used to be the Damen estate. The family gave it to the town, only Phil retained the right to live in the old mansion that's been turned into a clubhouse. Some says the Damens were just unloading a white elephant and perhaps they were, but the club has been good for us. Anybody in town can join for a hundred

bucks, and we got us a nice 18-hole course out there. I shot an 84 last September."

"Very good," I said. "Who else around here is in the novel?"

"Lemme see. There's Howard Cadman, president of the Hawleyville Boosters Club. Everybody figures he's the mayor in the book, a kind of comical character, but Howard keeps saying he's been 'immortalized' in literature. He likes that."

Walking into the auto sales shop owned by Howard Cadman, I again got the fey feeling that came from recognizing someone I'd never seen. Cadman obviously was the book's mayor.

He was a tall, slender man with greying hair and an excessively dignified manner.

When I told him I was in town to make arrangements for promoting the movie of *HOME OF THE HEART* he took me into his private office and closed the door.

"I'm delighted to meet somebody from the movie company," he said, "because I've been wondering who they would get to play me. I'm the mayor in the book, you know. Maybe Amy exaggerated a few little traits for the literary effect, but I'm honest enough to admit that's me all right. Now, about the movie. I was thinking of maybe somebody along the lines of Gregory Peck for my part. A mature, dignified actor with an obvious sense of compassion for others. Now if Peck isn't available, I was thinking . . ."

"Excuse me," I said, "but that's out of my field. I'm just connected with the promotion of the movie, the publicity."

"Oh." For a moment he looked so disappointed that I thought he might clam up on me, but as he murmured, "Publicity, eh," he brightened.

"How can I help?" he asked.

I told him I'd like to see the Boosters Club sponsor an "Amy Neal Day" while she was in Hawleyville, with a small ceremony of some kind, perhaps with Mr. Cadman himself

presenting her with the key to the city. In return, I said, I'd be happy to donate seven hundred and fifty dollars to whatever project the club might designate.

"This town certainly should honor Amy Neal." Cadman was enthusiastic. "I don't care what Ed Keating says. He can write all the editorials against Amy Neal that he wants, because of the way she treated the Damen family, but the Boosters Club will be behind you all the way." He was delighted all over again to hear about the *Focus* magazine project and said he most certainly would make a public presentation of the key to the city to Amy.

"I'm not a publicity hound, don't get that idea," he said, "but I'm active in politics, and you know how that is. You've got to get out and let people know who you are. I'm thinking of running for the state legislature next fall."

He liked my seven hundred and fifty dollars too. "We can donate that to the club's civic improvement fund," he said.

By this time I realized I had just thrown away seven hundred and fifty dollars because I could have had Cadman's support without the money, as long as there was a chance for him to make a speech or get his photograph in *Focus* magazine. Worse, it was the kind of deal that Amy would call a "bribe"; I made a mental note to see that she never would hear about it.

"I think HOME OF THE HEART has been good for Hawleyville," Cadman said. "I don't care what Ed Keating says."

I said I'd be in touch with him to arrange the details of "Amy Neal Day" and asked where I could find Phil Damen.

"Out at the country club," he said, "where else?"

On the way, I decided to look up Ed Keating at the *Argus*, to see if I could soften him up a little.

To find him all I had to do was to walk in off the street into the one room that was both editorial and business office. Near the door sat a trim, grey-haired woman who seemed to

be the want-ad taker, telephone operator, and receptionist. Later I found out that she also was the society editor.

"Mr. Keating?" I asked.

"That's him back by the window," she said, pointing to a desk in the rear corner of the room. "You might as well go in and have a chair. He's on the phone with Mrs. Hubbard, and I expect he'll be a while."

When I took a chair beside Keating's desk he didn't even look up.

"Yes, Mrs. Hubbard," he was saying, "that's quite true."

Ed Keating was not what I had expected. Instead of being a sour, pinch-faced creature, with pointed nose and piercing eyes—which had been my image of him—he was a round little man with thinning hair, friendly eyes, and a mouth that looked as if he were used to laughing, although he was not amused at the moment.

"I am sorry about that, Mrs. Hubbard," he was saying. "We do our best to get the papers out on time, but the regular boy was sick yesterday, and we had to use a substitute."

He had a prominent nose, in the shape of a gourd, which twitched occasionally as he listened. Between his fingers he had a lighted cigarette that he puffed nervously, and in front of him was a sheet of copy paper that he was trying to read while listening to Mrs. Hubbard. From time to time he would put down the cigarette and make a correction on the paper.

"Just offhand I don't remember who the substitute was, Mrs. Hubbard, but let me see." He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper. "Oh yes, it was the Crandell boy."

A girl laid a pile of UPI wire copy on the desk beside him, and he began thumbing through it while listening. I couldn't hear what was being said, but I could tell from the tone that the caller was indignant.

"But Mrs. Hubbard," Keating said, keeping his voice on an even keel, "I know the Crandells are Democrats and that

this is a Republican paper. But honestly, Mrs. Hubbard, the carrier boys don't influence our editorial policy, and I'm sure the boy didn't skip your house just because Fred is the Republican chairman. The boy's only nine or ten years old, and I don't suppose he even knows what a Republican is."

He began sorting the wire copy into two piles while smashing out one cigarette and lighting another. The phone he held by scrunching up his shoulder so that he'd have both hands free.

"Yes, Mrs. Hubbard, I agree. It is time he was finding out about our political system, but I believe that's up to the schools, don't you?"

His nose twitched before he said, "Yes, that's a fine idea. I'll do an editorial on that very soon. Now, about last evening's paper, Mrs. Hubbard, I did what I could. When you called the house I jumped up from the middle of my dinner, got my car, and brought you my copy of the paper. That's how much we value you as a subscriber, Mrs. Hubbard."

He went ahead with sorting the wire copy, and I gathered that he had mollified Mrs. Hubbard because her voice had dropped a decibel or two.

"Yes, I have the story about your daughter's engagement," he said. "It's right here in front of me. And please give her my best wishes. The fellow she's marrying is a mighty promising young man."

His nose twitched again.

"Oh," he said. "Well, he looks like a nice young man."

With his pencil he crossed out a line in the engagement story on his desk.

"Mrs. Hubbard, I'm sorry, but we never put engagement announcements on page one."

The bulb on his nose was trembling.

"Yes, I know Fred is one of our biggest advertisers, and believe me Mrs. Hubbard we do appreciate the business. But it's simply our policy not to put society news on page one.

We put it on the society page. Now I tell you what I'll do. I'll take Nancy's photograph and run it two columns wide at the top of the page. Underneath, we'll have a two-column headline—in nice large type—and I'll see that it gets in to-day's paper without fail."

He puffed on the cigarette and read three more pieces of wire copy before he said:

"Not at all Mrs. Hubbard. Please do call at any time. It was nice talking to you and give my regards to Fred. Good-bye."

He looked at me and said, "Yes sir."

I smiled. "Excuse me for eavesdropping," I said, "but I couldn't help but hear that you were dealing with an irate subscriber. I know what you are up against because I used to be a newspaperman myself."

"Is that so?" He seemed mildly interested. "Where?"

"New York."

"Oh New York." He dismissed the nation's biggest city with a wave of the hand. "You guys sitting up there in your concrete towers don't know what problems are. You're well insulated from your readers. But here I'm a sitting duck. A woman doesn't get her paper and she thinks I'm mad at her; we spell somebody's name wrong and they're in here threatening to sue me for libel; we print anything about anybody from the north end of town getting into a jam with the police—even a parking ticket—and I get howls of anguish, maybe even lose an advertising account. New York, hah! What do you want anyway?"

I told him who I was, who I represented, and why I was there—and watched him freeze.

"I'd just like to have a chance to explain our position, Mr. Keating," I said. "Then I think you'd see things a little differently. You know you were pretty hard on Amy Neal, and she's really a charming, sensitive woman."

"Hah." Keating's attitude was 180 degrees away from the conciliatory position he'd taken with his subscriber. "Sensi-

tive! She should have remembered that the people in this town can be sensitive, too. The way she treated the Damen family was a crime. Sure I know its 'fiction' and there's nobody named Damen in the book, but to anyone around here it's obvious who she's talking about, and the Damens are really hurt. It's a shame that they should be held up to slander and ridicule, after all that they have done for this town. Now will you please let me put out the paper." He waved a handful of copy. "I've got a lot of work to do."

"Mr. Keating," I said, remaining cheerful, friendly, courteous, kind, brave, and so on, "I think I could change your mind about Amy Neal. How about having lunch with me?"

"No thanks." He shook his head. "I just have a sandwich in here. Don't have time for lunch."

"How about a drink later this afternoon?"

"God no. I got an ulcer and haven't had a drink in ten years. And don't think I don't miss it."

"Dinner?"

Keating stood up. "Look, Mr. Communications Counselor, or whatever, you can't woo me with lunch, drinks, or dinner, or with your best public relations approach. You can't charm me, and I'm not going to change my position. But before you go I'm going to give you a bit of advice, and you can take it or leave it."

His desk phone began ringing, but he ignored it.

"I want to tell you one thing," he said. "If you bring Amy Neal back here, you'll regret it. She'll be hurt by the reception she gets here, and I remember her as a decent kid around town. I liked her father. Please don't bring her back here; we don't want her. Now good-bye."

He picked up the phone and turned his back on me.

Outside, I stood on the curb a moment looking at the courthouse and trying to sort out my feelings. What I didn't understand was this:

Why was it that Howard Cadman, who was my ally, was a horse's ass?

Why was it that Ed Keating, who was the enemy, was a man I could admire and respect? My god, if he'd let me, I could even *like* him.

Chapter 11

I DROVE out to the country club and left the car in the parking lot. The foyer of the old Damen mansion was a domed, two-story room with curving staircases on either side. Since no one was around I tried the first door on the right which opened into a finely-appointed lounge, with vaulted windows from floor to ceiling and tapestries on the walls. Along one side was a mahogany bar, presided over by a bartender talking to the lone patron, whom I recognized immediately as Amy's Hack Winston—Hawleyville's Phil Damen.

Damen was nearing those middle years where a man can be somewhere between brawny and chubby. He had wide shoulders and the makings of a paunch. His hair was receding, his eyelids were puffy, and his jowls drooped; yet he still was a fairly handsome man who looked as if he could be trim again after a few weeks in the steam baths and on the wagon.

"Excuse me," I said. "Are you Phil Damen?"

"Yes." He nodded, and I noticed that the eyes under those bags were bright and clear.

"I'm Lee Medford."

"Hello." He held out a carefully-manicured but strong hand. "Have a drink."

At eleven o'clock in the morning it was a little early for me, but I feared that if I declined Phil Damen would be offended.

"Scotch on the rocks, please," I said.

"Better make it Black Label," Damen told the bartender. "This gentleman looks as if he travels first class."

I thanked him for the compliment and told him who I was and why I was there, carefully trying to choose the right words, not associating myself too closely with Amy Neal.

But I nearly slid off the bar stool when Damen said, "Any friend of Amy Neal's has to be a friend of mine. Better make that a double for Mr. Medford, Hugo."

I must have looked startled, too, because Damen said, "What's the matter? Surprised?"

"Yes," I admitted. "Yes I am. As a matter of fact I just left Ed Keating at the *Argus*. He said HOME OF THE HEART is a vicious book that slanders and ridicules the Damen family. I had figured you might try to slug me."

Damen chuckled, a deep-throated, hoarse laugh that was ingratiating.

"That's my mother and sister he's talking about. They are sore; in fact they both wanted to sue until I pointed out that the book was close enough to the truth in some instances to make a court hearing very embarrassing. They both say that because of the book they're ashamed to come back to Hawleyville. But what the hell, neither of them had any intention of returning. Mother lives in Ft. Lauderdale and my sister in Palm Springs. They are about as far as they can get from Hawleyville and from each other, and they intend to keep

it that way. As for me, I thought the book was a wow. I've never met Amy Neal, but I can tell you she has this town down cold. Best book I ever read."

I kept thinking he must be pulling my leg, but he seemed serious enough.

"Don't be too harsh with Ed Keating," he said. "Poor Ed's caught in the middle. He has to defend the Damens' virtue because, you see, we own the paper."

He ordered us another drink, double Scotch for me and a double vodka on the rocks for himself.

"Well, ah," I suggested hesitantly, "if you feel favorably disposed toward the book, could you get Keating to ease off a little? If he keeps it up with those editorials, I'm afraid Amy is going to run into a hornet's nest when she comes here."

"No." He was firm about it. "I liked the book, but I'm not going to mix into the affairs of the paper. In the first place the ownership is a three-way deal—my mother, my sister, and me. So I'd be outvoted, and I'd only be putting Ed on the spot, more than he is already. He's got enough problems without me bothering him. What's more if I start giving him orders he'll think I want to run the paper, and he'll be pestering me for decisions all the time. And that's exactly what I don't want."

He paused long enough to swallow half his vodka. "I like things the way they are, and I intend to keep them that way. Mostly, in the mornings I play golf—this morning only nine holes because it's so cold. Afternoons I do my drinking right here where I can't get into much trouble. And sooner or later all my friends drift in. By the time they get here late in the afternoon they all seem absolutely charming. And where can you find a pleasanter place to get smashed?"

He gestured toward the tapestries, the lounge chairs, the wide windows. "The Phil Damen Memorial Saloon," he said. "You've read the book. You know I'm the town bum. I don't

work, and I have no intention of starting. I've got enough money, and if I went into one of the family businesses I'd just be taking a job away from somebody who needs it. And my mother and sister would be on my back all the time."

In a gulp, he finished his drink.

"We're what you might call a loosely knit family," he said. "My father disliked my mother; my mother dislikes my sister; my sister dislikes me; and I dislike all of them, except for my father. He's dead. He was a stuffy old bastard."

Phil Damen's forthright manner was shocking, but also disarming.

"Hugo," he said, "bring us another drink."

I put my hand over my glass and said, "Skip me this time please." Phil Damen looked so disappointed in me that I added, "I have a lot of work to do this afternoon."

"Aah." Damen's snort made it apparent what he thought of that. "Stick around and have lunch with me, and then we'll do some serious drinking."

I begged off, swallowed the last of my drink and stood up. He was making boozing sound so attractive that I was afraid I might be there for a week if I didn't go now.

"One thing before you go," he said. "I want you to tell Amy Neal that her book is absolutely true to life except for one bit of exaggeration about this Casanova-type character that everyone in town assumes is me. This is just between me and Amy Neal, you understand, because I wouldn't want it to get around town, but in describing the sexual achievements of this fellow, well she gilded the lily a bit. He's not really that good."

"But please tell her I appreciate the free advertising. That book has done wonders for my social life—in certain circles. You know how curious women are, and I've found that there's a pretty good percentage around here who want to find out if what she says in the book is true."

I suspected he was giving me the business, but I really

could not tell. He seemed to be completely in earnest as he continued:

"Remember I said that in the mornings I play golf and in the afternoons I drink? That leaves the evenings, for which I have other, ah, pursuits—and I must say that since the book was published the pursuits have been getting shorter and shorter. It's been wonderful. Please give her my sincerest thanks."

I said I would and started to leave, but again he laid a hand on my arm to stop me.

"Could you do this?" he asked. "Get Amy Neal to autograph a copy of the book for me? All I want her to do is to write, 'To Phil Damen, who's really Hack Winston.' Man, oh man, an endorsement like that, in writing, would open every bedroom door from here to Indianapolis."

"Sure," I said, "sure, I'll ask her."

As I left he was chuckling to himself and motioning for another drink.

On the way into town I stopped at a drive-in for a quick lunch. I was in a hurry to see Miss Laskey, Amy's former English instructor at the high school. From the proprietor of Fred's Chop House, where I ate breakfast, I had learned that she was the "Miss Sylvester" of the book, the wise and dedicated teacher.

At the school I was told she had classes until 2:30, and while waiting for her to be free I wandered up and down Main street, stopping into stores, buying a little something here and there, and chatting with the clerks and storekeepers about Amy. Most of the older persons who remembered her at all thought of Amy as a lonely, moody child, but the younger group of around her age said she was vivacious, gay and witty, quick with the quips, fun to be around. The grumbling about the book came mostly from the elders and from those much younger than Amy. In a pool hall I encountered several of the latter, whose comments about Amy

were violent and obscene. None had read the book but all were sure it besmirched their character, although how that could be done I wouldn't know.

In the school I found Miss Laskey at her desk. She was alone except for a boy sitting in the rear of the room and chewing the end of a pencil in the throes of the creative effort.

Miss Laskey must have been in her sixties, but her hair was coal black, pulled straight back into a bun. She had a plain face with high cheekbones, a severe mouth, and stern eyes.

With her attention focused on the papers in front of her, she didn't hear me approaching until I said, "Hello, Miss Sylvester." It was intended to be a compliment, and when she glanced up in surprise she seemed pleased. Her thin lips opened into a friendly smile and her eyes reflected an unexpected warmth and sense of humor.

"Thank you," she said, "you've read the book?"

I told her I had and introduced myself, telling her I was in town to look for background on Amy that might help in promoting the movie of *HOME OF THE HEART*.

"Oh how is Amy?" she asked, and I could tell she really wanted to know.

I told her that Amy planned to come to Hawleyville soon and that I expected *Focus* magazine would want to photograph the two of them together.

"Oh I'd be so proud." Miss Laskey was not afraid to let her emotions show. "Mr. Medford, I've been a teacher for over forty years, and if I've never achieved anything else it all seems worthwhile because of Amy Neal. She was such a wonderful student—perceptive, eager to learn, conscientious. A really marvelous girl, and a truly sensitive person. I adored her."

She had to pause because the boy who had been sitting at

his desk was standing before her, holding out a sheet of paper.

"Will that do, Miss Laskey? I got to go." He was poised on the balls of his feet, as if waiting for the starter's gun.

"Just a minute, Arthur," she said. "I want to read this." And she took her time while Arthur shifted nervously from one foot to the other.

"Gee, Miss Laskey," he protested, "I'm already late for the ball game."

If she heard him she gave no sign but continued reading, making a red pencil mark here and there.

When she looked up, she said, "I guess this will do Arthur." He sprinted for the door but didn't quite make it before she called, "Oh Arthur." He pulled up short.

"Remember what I've said before," she told him. "I can't make you do your home work, but I can make you wish you had."

"Yes, Miss Laskey, you sure can." He was off and running.

The teacher asked me to pull up a chair and then began telling me about Amy and how from the first she had seen the creative spark in the shy child.

"I did everything I could to encourage her," Miss Laskey recalled. "I got her to work on the year book and on the school paper, and she really did blossom forth. She grew to be more sociable, made many friends, and developed into a personable young lady by the time she left here—in addition to being by far the best writer I've taught in forty-two years."

She said that over the years Amy had kept in touch with her, sending a card or a note at Christmas time. "And then last Christmas," Miss Laskey recalled, "she sent me a present and with it a note of thanks for the help I had given her. It was such a sweet note, and the present was so lovely, that I cried all night. And Mr. Medford I can assure you that I am not a woman who cries easily."

The gift, she said, had touched her deeply.

"What do you send to an old maid school teacher, Mr. Medford? A handkerchief? A box of soap? Woolen mittens? An embroidered sampler saying, 'Truth Is Beauty'? Yes, that's what you send, if you send anything at all. But not if you are Amy Neal.

"Instead, Amy sent me a necklace with a real diamond in it. The gift was just like her. Not practical, just beautiful. She's sensitive enough to know what it means to an aging woman to get something she doesn't need, something she's always wanted but would never buy for herself."

Miss Laskey burst into tears.

I sat there mutely, feeling helpless, until she sobbed, "Good-bye, Mr. Medford. Please forgive me."

As I went out the door she was wiping her eyes.

It was only 3:30, and I wanted to see Amy's Aunt Charlotte before I left town. From the phone book in a gas station I got the address: 708 Maple Street.

I wasn't sure what a visit to Aunt Charlotte would achieve—maybe I was just curious—but I also thought it would be well to see how deep was the feud with Amy and to probe around a little for a hint that it might be patched up. I didn't want Amy cracking-up from the trauma of facing her aunt when she came to Hawleyville.

The house was about a two-minute drive from the center of town, a big, old-fashioned square frame dwelling with a porch all the way across the front. There were two full stories, and the attic windows were curtained, too, indicating someone must be living there. I remembered that Amy said her aunt was taking in roomers.

The only description of Aunt Charlotte I'd had from Amy was that she was "big and fat," which left me unprepared for the motherly looking woman who answered the bell.

"Are you Amy Neal's Aunt Charlotte?" I asked, thinking I must have the wrong address.

"That's right," she said, "are you a friend of Amy's?"

I said I was and she led me into the living room while I tried to adjust to the sweet, gracious, and hospitable image of Aunt Charlotte in person as compared with Amy's description of her as a combination shrew and boss of the chain gang. She didn't look so tough.

On the contrary she seemed quite harmless as she began giving me the usual kind of female prattle you get when one woman is inquiring about another. Aunt Charlotte's hair was streaked with grey but carefully groomed and freshly waved. I guessed she was in her mid-fifties, and her face was pleasant if not attractive. The middle-age spread had caught up with her, but she was not obese, just plump.

She wanted to know about Amy, and how was Randy, and was Arthur still traveling, and wasn't it a shame that Amy never came to see her. But her complaints were mild, and she indicated she was proud of Amy's success. That editorial in the *Argus*, she said, had made her blood boil and just wait until the next time she saw Ed Keating.

"Is Amy putting on weight?" she asked. "I always said she would get hippy as she grew older. I don't know why I thought this but when she was only a child I said many times, 'I'll say that when Amy is thirty she'll be real fleshy like.' Of course she only laughed at me; I never could tell her anything. Would you like a piece of cake and some coffee, Mr. Medford?"

I said I would, and she disappeared into the kitchen for so long I was beginning to think she was baking the cake before she returned with a large pot of coffee and two giant pieces of chocolate cake on a tray.

While I munched and sipped Aunt Charlotte continued to cross-examine me about Amy without ever giving me a chance to answer. It was a curious conversation, but the cake was good.

Then she began talking so rapidly about her life with Amy in a sing-song voice that I never got a chance to say why I

was there, and she never asked. As long as she was talking she seemed happy, and whether she had anything to say apparently was of no concern. A couple of times I caught myself nodding as her voice rose and fell in a rhythmic gush, and when I finally was able to break in it was to tell her I must be going.

"Oh what a shame," she said, "it seems like you just got here. Now you come back real soon so we can have a really good talk. It's so seldom I get any news about Amy. When you see her you tell her that Aunt Charlotte would dearly love to have a letter once in a while. After all, she's my own brother's flesh and blood, and I raised her like a mother."

I kept edging toward the door, and I had it open when she asked me for at least the fifth time to be sure and tell Amy she was well and that everything was just fine.

"And please tell her, too," she said, "that I'm suing her for one hundred thousand dollars."

Chapter 12

DRIVING back to the Indianapolis airport, I began picking over the results of my probing to see what sort of rating Amy had in Hawleyville and whether the outlook was pro or con. The trend was in Amy's favor, counting Miss Laskey, Howard Cadman, Phil Damen, Nat Crowe and others. But still, I had sensed an undercurrent of resentment that might be fanned into a blaze by Ed Keating, if he chose, and with enough pressure from the women in the Damen family that might be his choice. Those loafers around the pool hall also could be a menace, and then there was this crazy business with Aunt Charlotte.

"Sue Amy for what?" I had asked.

"For one hundred thousand dollars," she repeated.

"But why? What for?" She had me gaping.

"For libel, account of what she said about me in the book." Her manner was so matter of fact, so lacking in malice or acrimony, that she might have been giving me her recipe for chocolate cake.

"But you're not in the book," I protested. "Carole's aunt in the book is nothing like you; you're not in HOME OF THE HEART at all."

"Oh, but I am," she insisted. "I've got a lawyer, Lou Barker, down on Chestnut Street, and he's going to draw up the papers."

She folded her arms and nodded, as if to say "so there."

"Lou mostly handles mortgages," she prattled, "but he's a good lawyer, and he's married to my second cousin, Norma, who has had this trouble with her knee ever since she got hit by that truck three years ago. That was a terrible accident; she was just turning her car around down on Damen Street when this big truck came barreling through and crashed into her. She was in the hospital for over two months, but with Lou being a lawyer and everything they got a pretty good settlement—thirty thousand dollars I think it was—and with it they went to Florida the next winter. That's where Norma got too much sun, and I think that's what causes this skin rash that's been bothering her. Anyway, Norma says go ahead and sue. 'What can you lose,' she says, 'Lou won't charge much unless you win and then of course he'll want his fair share and Lord knows we can use the money.' So a couple of weeks ago I was over there for one of Norma's baked bean dinners. She makes the most delicious baked beans, uses pure molasses and lets them cook for ninety minutes, or is it an hour and ninety minutes? No that couldn't be . . ."

"I'll tell Amy," I said. "I'll tell her."

I always have had trouble getting interested in recipes for baked beans, and anyway there was no use in arguing with her. With help from Norma and Lou, she obviously had made up her mind.

I slept late the next morning, took my time eating breakfast and then checked with the answering service to see what calls I'd had during my absence. Janice Carlisle had

called three times and Norma Ackley twice. Also Frankie Moline had called and left his home number. He said it was urgent.

When I called him his greeting was as effusive as it was insincere.

"Lee baby," he said. "We've got a little old meeting set up for Monday. Breakfast in Mr. Foshay's suite at the Pierre at nine o'clock, nine o'clock. He wants a rundown on the Hawleyville arrangements. So I set up sort of a committee meeting of Mr. Foshay, Mr. Boice, George Schaffer, me, and you. When we've reached the point that Mr. Foshay is interested in the arrangements the ball's really rolling, Lee baby, really rolling."

"Isn't it possible," I asked, "that Walter Driscoll will have something to say about this? Without him, there won't be any arrangements."

"Lee baby," Moline cooed, "we're depending on you to coordinate everything with Driscoll."

"Thanks," I said, meaning "nuts."

I still felt the same way Monday morning when a Japanese houseboy answered my ring at Foshay's apartment and took my hat. The others were there ahead of me; I suppose some subconscious resentment against their muscling in on the *Focus* project had caused me to be late.

"This is Mr. Boice," said Foshay, indicating a lanky, angular man of about sixty who unfolded in sections as he rose from a couch. His face was familiar, although we had not met before, because his photograph appeared fairly regularly in the newspapers, as the chairman of a society benefit party, as a member of a hospital board, or upon his election as a director of some corporation. He used the Social Register the way other people use the "yellow pages."

"We might as well go into breakfast," said Foshay immediately after the introductions.

The starter was orange juice, and I noticed that George

Schauffer viewed it with distaste. "Soft" drinks were unlikely to be on his diet.

The juice was followed by a hot cereal which Foshay ignored while congratulating Foshay on his plan for combining the finals in the HOME OF THE HEART talent search with Amy's pilgrimage to the scenes of her childhood and the locale of the movie.

He wanted to know what arrangements I had made so far, and I told him about the plan for "Amy Neal Day." Moline said he guessed that wouldn't interfere with anything, and Schauffer said he could see no particular harm in it.

Having missed the cereal course, Foshay now was devoting his full attention to the scrambled eggs and bacon, and in the hope I might get an endorsement from someone I asked Mr. Boice if he had an opinion.

I might as well have asked Richard Burton if he likes girls. Mr. Boice had an opinion, and he spent forty-five minutes expressing it, although it had nothing much to do with "Amy Neal Day." It was more of a critique of Owen Boice's literary judgment which he disclosed had rescued HOME OF THE HEART from the unskilled hands of some underling at Owen Boice and Company and then had brought it to full flower as one of the most successful novels of modern times, if not *the* most successful novel of *all* time. Owen Boice, I learned, had done more for the development of the novel as an art form than anyone since Gutenberg.

Watching him, I was fascinated by the sharp division between the upper and lower halves of the face, the top pinched and severe, the bottom cheery with a beery mouth and jowls. His thin, pointed nose seemed to be an extension of his long, sloping forehead which, with his flinty eyes and sharp cheekbones, projected the image of Old New England asceticism that clashed head-on with the jiggly jowls and the heavy, sensual lips. A Park Avenue Puritan, I thought.

After completing his account of the rescue of HOME OF THE

HEART from a rejection slip, he then described the manner in which he succeeded in selling the movie rights to a reluctant Albert Foshay.

Having heard the Foshay version of how he had extracted the film rights from Boice, practically at gunpoint, I watched the movie-maker closely, but his only reaction was to call for more coffee, loudly.

"I suggest that we time the *Focus* visit to Hawleyville and the windup of the movie talent search with the announcement of the Pulitzer Prize awards," Boice continued. "There is no doubt at all that HOME OF THE HEART will win the prize for the best novel this time, and Amy Neal should be in Hawleyville then. That way every news story about the Pulitzer award will have to mention that Amy Neal learned of her selection while helping to arrange for the movie. That way both the book and the film will get the maximum publicity out of the prize announcement."

Boice paused to await the applause. Albert Foshay liked the idea. George Schaffer thought it was a stroke of genius, and Moline couldn't find any flaw.

It was a shrewd plan, and if I weren't a knucklehead I would have thought of it myself. But I had some reservations.

"How sure can we be that HOME OF THE HEART will win the prize?" I asked.

Owen Boice looked disappointed in me. "I *know* it," he said.

I pointed out that this gave us only two weeks to make the arrangements, but Albert Foshay had the answer to that.

"So make 'em," he said.

I added that the setting of the date would depend upon Walter Driscoll and the *Focus* magazine team, but Frankie Moline had the answer to that.

"You can arrange it," he said.

His own contribution, he said, would be to invite all the important Hollywood movie magazine writers, newspaper

columnists, radio commentators, and other film reporters, along with representatives of UPI and AP.

Once again I had to drag my feet by pointing out that Walter Driscoll might back out of the project if we opened it up to everyone. "It's an exclusive for *Focus*," I said. "That's why he likes it."

Moline was neither abashed nor convinced. "Lee baby," he said, "you work it out with Driscoll."

Foshay nodded his approval. "The emergence of two new stars," he said. "Before they've ever been in a movie. That's what Foshay is interested in. Regional winners to be brought to Indiana for a final judging. That's the ticket."

"Who are the regional winners?" I asked, knowing I shouldn't be nosy but not being able to stop myself.

"We'll discuss that later," said Foshay, with a wave of his hand.

I nodded and brushed aside as unworthy the suspicion that there were no regional winners.

The meeting broke up with Boice and Schaffer leaving first. I was delayed while Moline showed me his new cuff links, which he had acquired at a forty per cent discount.

I had started down the corridor before I remembered I had left without my hat. Turning back, I found the door still open, and as I walked into the foyer I heard the rumble of Foshay's froggy voice from around the corner.

"That Medford is a handsome bastard," he was saying. "Herb Gardner told Foshay that; said our woman author wouldn't be able to resist him and that's why Foshay agreed to bring him into this promotion."

I should have walked out right then, but I couldn't because Moline was saying: "He's pretty green about our kind of promotion, Mr. Foshay, but I'm keeping him tuned to the right frequency. I'll say one thing for him; I'll bet he's the greatest swordsman since D'Artagnan."

Grabbing my hat off the hall table, I tip-toed into the cor-

ridor and walked swiftly to the elevators. As I waited, I found myself face-to-face with Lee Medford in a wall mirror, and I turned away from him with a grimace. There was a word for the person that Foshay and Moline thought was me, but I wasn't going to use it. Not even to myself.

Determined not to dwell upon my eavesdropping, I hurried over to *Focus* magazine where, after Walter Driscoll had assured me of his complete recovery from the attack of poison ivy, I proposed that he do the Hawleyville bit with Amy in exactly two weeks.

"This is in confidence, Walter," I said, lowering my voice as if I thought the place were bugged, "but Amy is going to get the Pulitzer Prize for HOME OF THE HEART. If you happened to be with her in Hawleyville at the time she is notified, you could get some nice exclusive quotes and pictures on her reaction."

I felt sneaky, but also happy, as I saw Walter nodding to himself.

"Yes," he said, "I'd been thinking that would be a good idea. If you're sure it's in the bag, then that's fine with me."

I then told him about "Amy Neal Day" and said I'd made the hotel arrangements for the *Focus* crew. He said that would be fine.

As I was leaving, I stopped at the door. "Oh yes," I said with elaborate insouciance, "one other thing. Frankie Moline wants to invite some movie reporters and a few columnists to the Hawleyville bash. Okay?"

He didn't say no, but he did give a pretty fair parody of a nervous breakdown.

"It's all off," he screamed. "It's a double cross. I've been stabbed."

He kicked a wastebasket, spewing the contents around the room.

"How could you do this?" he shouted. "You tell me it's ex-

clusive and then you ask the whole damn world to come along. Just forget the whole damn thing."

He started to kick the wastebasket and then remembered he'd already done that. So he pounded the top of the desk instead.

I waited until he had run out of abuse for me, for Foshay Productions, for Moline, for Amy Neal, and for Harry Barden, who was somebody I'd never heard of. Walter was so excited he had his enemies mixed up.

When he stopped yelling I began with the compromise proposals, and he finally agreed that we could invite up to six writers from publications that would not be competing with *Focus*. I told him, truthfully, that they would be primarily interested in the talent contest anyway.

On the way back to the office I got to thinking about the Pulitzer Prize, and as soon as I got there I called a book critic I knew and asked him what novel was the favorite. He said *HOME OF THE HEART* couldn't miss.

"Why," he asked. "You thinking of buying a book?"

He always had to be a wise guy, but I gave him a big ha-ha and my thanks. It wasn't that I thought Owen Boice was a liar, but I'd found that sometimes persons with vested interests look into the future of those interests and see what they want to see instead of what's there. Before I went overboard on the Pulitzer tie-in I wanted to be sure I knew which way to swim.

The critic's assurance was good enough for me, and I called Amy and gave her the dates for the Hawleyville junket.

"You ought to be there Sunday night," I told her. "The program we're setting up will run into Wednesday."

"Program?"

"Yes, there'll be a couple of things beside the picture taking." I was so casual about it that I suppose she couldn't help but be suspicious. "Foshay Productions wants to have the

final round of its talent search in Hawleyville, and Foshay wants you to be a judge."

"But I don't know anything about acting," Amy protested.

"Never mind," I assured her. "The other judges do."

Then I told her about "Amy Neal Day."

"Oh god," she said.

"That's about it," I said, deciding not to mention the connection between the selection of a date and the awarding of the Pulitzer Prizes. That, I knew she wouldn't like. Especially the part about asking the governor to come over and make a little speech of congratulations at a dinner that night, which I had just thought of.

To keep her from asking any questions, I quickly mentioned that I had seen Miss Laskey.

"Oh, how is she?" Amy asked, and I could tell she was delighted with what I had to tell her about the teacher.

"Wait a minute," she said, "what were you doing in Hawleyville?"

"Just laying the groundwork," I said. No need to tell her I was conducting an Amy Neal popularity poll, but I did do Aunt Charlotte's bidding.

"I saw your Aunt Charlotte," I said. "She asked me to tell you that she's going to sue you for one hundred thousand dollars for libel."

"Yes, I know." Amy was amazingly calm. "I heard from her lawyer this morning, a copy of a letter to Owen Boice and Company. She's balmy. She's not even in the book."

"She's not the prototype of the girl Carole's aunt, is she?"

"Lord no," said Amy. "Carole's aunt is a *sympathetic* character."

I said I'd be seeing her and hung up just in time to field a call from Albert Foshay.

"We'll have to settle," he said for a starter.

Instead of saying, "Huh?," as I had the first time we met, I said, "Yes sir." I was getting smarter. Although he didn't

make any sense at the moment, I knew he would eventually if I could just stay with him.

"He'll take three thousand dollars and drop the suit," Foshay added. "If she doesn't want to pay it, Foshay will. Can't start production with a plagiarism suit hanging over us; that might lead to all sorts of claims by this fellow down in Mississippi later on."

"Of course," I agreed. He was talking about the suit filed by a man who said Amy stole the plot from his short story.

"There's a detail that has to be ironed out," Foshay said. "The lawyers say the author won't settle for any amount because she feels the suit is a shakedown. Foshay wants you to change her mind."

As I'd noticed before, when Foshay gives orders you don't have to guess at his meaning.

After telling him I'd go right to work I sat for a moment looking at the phone. While I was still looking, it rang.

Moline wanted me to go to Hawleyville with him to start making arrangements.

"When?" I asked.

"Today," he said. "We don't have much time."

"Tomorrow," I said. "I'll meet you there tomorrow afternoon. First, I want to go up to Laketon to see Amy. An errand for Mr. Foshay."

Moline said that was "tickety boo" with him, and after I got rid of him I sat there looking at the telephone and wondering why I had said I "want" to go to Laketon. Did I really? If not, why didn't I just phone Amy?

I told Lars Johnston to meet me in Hawleyville the next afternoon, late, and I got a plane reservation to Minneapolis that night. The next morning I found Amy hanging out what she calls the "warsh."

"Hi," she said, "grab a sheet."

I helped her get the stuff draped over the lines, and then we sat on the edge of the picnic table to talk.

"You're a most percipient character," she said. "Whenever I need help in the worst way with those damn sheets, you turn up."

"That's my one talent," I admitted. "Sheet hanging. Sometimes, though, I'm a pretty fair errand boy. Foshay sent me out here to talk you into settling that plagiarism suit. He'll put up the money; it won't cost you anything."

"No thanks." Amy shook her head, and I knew I had spoken the truth when I assured Nat Crowe in Hawleyville that she was as pretty as ever. "That blackmailer isn't going to get a cent. I didn't steal his plot, and I'm not going to have him paid off. I've made up my mind to that; I'm in the right."

"Amy," I said, "the cemeteries are full of people who were right."

"So maybe they're better off there than being alive and having to knuckle under all the time." One trouble with trying to change Amy's mind was that she always made sense. Not much maybe, but some.

I gave up and to change the subject I asked how she was getting along with her correspondence.

"Not good," she said. "The stenographer you brought out is in the house again today, but keeping up with the mail is a losing battle. You want to help?"

I had a couple of hours while waiting for my plane, and I did what I could.

Most of the accumulation was the routine stuff, fan mail and letters from persons who wanted her to rewrite their unpublished novels, or to listen to a life story that would make a marvelous book, or from those who wanted to sell her something—life insurance, portable bars, automobiles, camping equipment, bomb shelters, oil wells, Christmas cards. And then there was a letter from a woman who said she was going to sue Amy for false arrest.

"She's a mental case," Amy said. "I knew her in college, and when I was in New York, soon after the book was pub-

lished, she called me one day and I took her to lunch. In the middle of it she asked me for the money for an abortion. I said I didn't have it, which I didn't, and anyway I hardly knew her. She blew her top, started cursing me and throwing dishes. It was right out of a nightmare. Fortunately, when the police came I had sense enough to give them my married name, so it didn't make the papers, except for a couple of lines about this woman going berserk and being taken to the psychiatric ward."

Amy had to take a phone call from a solicitor for a charitable organization before she could finish the story.

"I paid the restaurant for the damage," she recalled, "rather than have them prosecute this poor woman, but then I found out she wasn't even pregnant. She's a long-term psycho, and for weeks she's been writing me, blaming me for all her troubles. What can I do? I just turn the letters over to the lawyers so they'll be on file in case she really tries to start some sort of legal action. Lee, I wasn't cut out to be a bush-league celebrity. I like the money, but even that seems to disappear about as fast as it comes in—lawyers, taxes, agents, contributions and crazy stuff like mink coats and red Cadillacs. Every time I get another check from the publisher I also get two dozen new headaches. Look at this business with Aunt Charlotte. How can I have libeled her when she's not even in the book? It's all so unreal, almost a hallucination."

I agreed but said that right now we had to be concerned with the reality of the Hawleyville junket.

"The less public fuss, the better for me," Amy said. "I don't have the knack for all this taradiddle, hoopla, and huzzahing. With me, it never works out as planned. Look at that business with the Sultan. And there's the time I nearly got killed in an autographing session at Birnbaum's department store in Chicago."

I confessed I'd never heard of the Birnbaum incident.

"It was a gigantic promotion deal, worked out by George Schauffer with the store," she said. "I was to autograph the book, with the store giving free copies to the first hundred persons to show up. I'm afraid they over-sold me to the public with the advance advertising and promotion because by the time I arrived the police already were setting up barricades and getting people lined up on the sidewalk to wait their turn, just to get inside the store. I had to go up on the freight elevator from an alley entrance. In the book department they had a platform built, and the people were supposed to file through, get their autographed copy and pass on, like kids visiting Santa Claus.

"The idea was all right, but they didn't file through and they didn't pass on. They stormed the barricades, and it was the Fall of the Bastille, the charge up San Juan Hill, and D-Day all in one. First they started snatching the books out of my hand before I could sign them, then they began grabbing copies off the table beside me, until somebody overturned the table. Then some nut snatched the pen right out of my hand, and I had to stand up to keep from being knocked off my chair. The table I had been using got pushed aside, and I was overwhelmed. One woman snipped off a lock of my hair and another tried to pull off my wedding ring. Everybody was screaming and yelling, including me, and the only way I managed to escape was to grab a copy of a book out of somebody's hand and start flailing away at every head in sight. It was chaos unlimited until the police cleared the building. I'm surprised you hadn't heard of it; the papers all reported it, in Chicago anyway."

I had to leave to catch my plane before hearing the windup of the Birnbaum incident, but later Amy told me that the squelching of the riot was not the last of her travail for that day. As she was preparing to leave the store, a newspaper photographer rushed up, handed her a copy of **HOME OF THE HEART** and asked her to show him how she used it to defend

herself from the milling book lovers. She obliged by throwing the book at him as he focused his camera. "I missed, but he didn't," she said in explaining how the paper got a photograph of her pitching form.

At the airport I had time to call Foshay and tell him Amy wouldn't budge on the plagiarism suit, and he said never mind; his lawyers would have to find a way to dispose of it without her cooperation. I suppose he had a quiet payoff in mind, but he didn't say.

In Hawleyville I found Lars Johnston in the lobby of the Prairie Inn. He looked ill.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "You got a headache?"

"Yeah," he said, "that's him over there."

He pointed across the room to Frankie Moline who was talking with the room clerk.

"What now?"

"He's just rented the Hawleyville Country Club for three days at four thousand dollars a day," Lars said, "and that's going to be our headquarters during the Amy Neal festivities. He says no place else in town is suitable."

With a smile on my face and murder on my mind, I disengaged Moline from the room clerk and took him into a corner. "Frankie," I said, "it's got to be understood that from here on no arrangements are to be made for Amy Neal's visit to this town until I've at least been consulted."

"Sure, Lee baby," he grinned, "sure. Only reason I made the deal was that I happened to be talking to this fellow Damen, and I figured I'd better go ahead before he changed his mind. I thought it was what you'd want."

Frankie did have his points. He was amiable, charming, and good natured. But still a fink.

"It's a good deal," he insisted. "We get complete use of the club, clubhouse, dining room, golf course, pool, the works, from Sunday night until Wednesday night. The few people who live there permanently will move out so we can

use the rooms. Damen made only two stipulations: that he be allowed to play golf in the mornings and to drink in the bar during the afternoon; and that the suite he vacates must be used by Amy Neal. He said he met you last week. Does he strike you as a bit of a weird-o?"

I said he did indeed. "Let's go up to my room and start working on the program," I said.

Upstairs I put my coat in the closet, rolled up my sleeves, loosened my necktie and faced Frankie Moline once more.

"I still don't understand," I said, "why we have to take over an entire castle for this enterprise."

"Surely you don't expect our guests to live here?" His gestures made it clear that he was talking about the entire Prairie Inn. "This place looks like the poor farm for Tobacco Road. And anyway we'll need a lot of space for such a big crowd."

"Big crowd?"

"Let's see, let's see," Frankie said, starting to count on his fingers while I wished he would quit saying everything twice as if he thought I was too dumb to get it the first time. "There'll be at least three from *Focus* and you, Lars, George Schaffer, and me plus Amy Neal and maybe her goony husband. That's nine, and from Foshay Productions we'll have the director and his secretary, the casting director and his secretary, the producer and his secretary, the writers, three of them, the head cameraman plus a couple of assistants and a still photographer. That's, let's see, let's see, that's twenty-three right there."

"Twenty-two." Lars corrected him. As I said, he's a bear for details.

"Hold it," I said. "The deal with *Focus* magazine is for a maximum of six of the Hollywood crowd, and they have to be columnists or representatives of the fan magazines, with the understanding there'll be no pictures and no interviews with Amy. Otherwise, the *Focus* deal is off."

"But I've already invited fourteen," Moline protested.

"Then uninvite eight," I said.

We argued about that for an hour and finally cut the list to eight, which I thought I could square with Driscoll.

After reaching the compromise we went to the Hi-Lo for dinner, only they call it supper in Hawleyville. The dinner-break lasted longer than we'd expected because Moline had forgotten his before-meals pills, and we had to wait until he found a drug store that was open. When he came back he said he was lucky to have found the place because he was low on sleeping pills, too.

Returning to the hotel, we worked out a tentative program for the three days. Lars was assigned the task of arranging limousine transportation from the Indianapolis airport to Hawleyville for everyone on Sunday night, and I knew I could quit worrying about that. Lars would worry enough for all of us, and I was sure he would have at least two more cars than would be needed, just in case a couple of the drivers should drop dead of heart attacks.

Nothing was scheduled in Hawleyville for Sunday night except a buffet and open house in the club's bar.

Lars was also assigned to take over allotting of the available sleeping space at the club.

"Separate but equal facilities, remember that," Moline warned. "The Hollywood mob is all very status conscious. Especially those two female columnists. If you give one of them a bigger or better room than the other, you'll have your eyes scratched out—and maybe your ears bitten off—by midnight Sunday. That I can guarantee, guarantee."

We decided to hold the finals of the talent contest in the country club on Monday morning, and that reminded me we had made no housing arrangements for the contestants.

"Don't worry, don't worry," said Moline, who was going through his pockets looking for his after-dinner stomach mints. "They're just actors; I'll put 'em up here at the hotel."

"How many will there be?" Lars asked.

"About a dozen, I guess," Frankie said. "Don't worry, don't worry."

But I did worry because it was odd that Frankie didn't know the exact number of regional winners. If this talent search were phoney, and if Amy found it out, she'd ditch the whole project quicker than Frankie Moline could tell her not to worry.

We worked out the remainder of the Monday schedule this way:

11:00 A.M.—Amy and *Focus* photographer to high school for reunion with Miss Laskey.

12:30 P.M.—*Focus* photographer accompanies Amy to a reunion luncheon with members of her old high school class.

4:00 P.M.—Amy is hostess at cocktail party for members of the country club in appreciation of their cooperation with the production of *HOME OF THE HEART*. (I also made a note to announce Amy's winning of the Pulitzer prize at this time.)

7:00 P.M.—Dinner for visitors and officials of the Hawleyville Boosters Club.

For Tuesday we set up these events:

9:00 A.M.—Golf tournament for visitors from New York and Hollywood. (Everyone wins a prize—high score, low score, best one-hole score, longest putt, most balls lost, etc.)

1:00 P.M.—Amy addresses ladies luncheon (literary club or whatever is available). Location: to be selected.

5:00 P.M.—Cocktail party for visitors from New York and Hollywood and for the finalists in the Foshay Productions talent search.

7:00 P.M.—Dinner in honor of other famous Indiana authors including Booth Tarkington, James Whitcomb Riley, George Ade, etc. (I made a note to invite the governor to this dinner, instead of the one on the previous night. He couldn't refuse to pay homage to Hoosier authors.)

For Wednesday we lined things up this way:

9:00 A.M.—12 noon—*Focus* photographer accompanies Amy on nostalgic tour of Hawleyville landmarks and scenes of Amy's childhood such as schools, store where she worked one summer, father's former jewelry store, etc.

12:00 noon—Foshay Productions luncheon for local notables.

2:30 P.M.—Amy is presented with gold key to the city by president of Boosters Club. Brief speech by President Howard Cadman. (I wanted to include an announcement of the winners of the talent search at this time, but Moline cautioned against it. He said the judges might not have reached a decision by then.)

4:00 P.M.—Amy presents autographed copy of *HOME OF THE HEART* to Phil Damen at country club before limousines leave for Indianapolis airport. Cocktails to be available en route.

After we worked this out Moline announced it was time for his sleeping pill and also that he had to return to New York early the next day. Johnston and I agreed to stay through the day to work on the arrangements.

Work we did. I saw Miss Laskey and got her permission for Amy and a photographer, along with Walter Driscoll, to visit one of her classes on Monday. From her I got the names of members of Amy's high school class to be invited to the Monday luncheon.

Also I saw Howard Cadman, told him I'd write his presentation speech and bring him the gold key to be presented to Amy. From Cadman I also found out that Hawleyville did have a Ladies Literary Club that met once a month to hear a book report and exchange gossip. I found the president—a Mrs. Weston who looked something like Abraham Lincoln with a mustache—and arranged with her for the club to give a luncheon for Amy, with the bill going to Lee Medford Associates. She said she was thrilled, but I wasn't sure whether

it was because of the chance to meet Amy or the prospect of a free meal. She looked more like an eater than a reader.

Lars Johnston, meanwhile, was busy with the arrangements at the country club, personally inspecting each room that our group was to use. He conferred at length with the club manager on the details of the cocktail parties, luncheons, and dinners, and if I knew Lars, which I did, I was sure he was specifying everything from the size of the breakfast orange juice glasses to the year of the champagne that would be served during dinner. No item ever is too small for Lars' attention in these matters, and by the time we got into the car for the drive to Indianapolis I told him: "Now all the guests have to do for themselves is breathe."

"Yeah," he said, "but maybe we better have a couple of standby iron lungs, just in case."

Chapter 13

THE next morning I came close to giving up breathing myself.

Because our plane had been delayed, I didn't get to my apartment until after 3:00 A.M., and I was still asleep when the phone rang.

"Yeah?" I'm the kind who spends the first minutes of each day in a semi-coma.

"I suppose I woke you up." It was Herb Gardner.

"Yeah," I said, "but that's all right."

"All right!" If only Herb weren't so excitable. "By god Medford, it's time *somebody* woke you up."

"What time is it?" I couldn't see as far as the alarm clock.

"Too late," he said, "to undo the damage."

"Damage?"

"Don't you even know what's happened?"

"No." I was awake enough now to feel the first quivers of dismay and to remember that Herb had growled at me the same way when Amy fled to New York.

"It's in all the morning papers," he said. "Don't you ever read the papers?"

I was tempted to tell him hardly ever while I'm sleeping, but instead I said:

"Herb, I'm terribly sorry, but I've spent the last couple of days in Minnesota and Indiana working on this *Focus* magazine project we've talked about, and my plane was late getting in here last night. It was almost dawn before I got to bed, and I have not seen the papers."

"So," said Herb with no perceptible softening in his tone, "let me read you this:

"'Foshay Announces New Search for Talent.' That's just the headline. The story says: 'Movie-maker Albert Foshay today invited aspiring actors and actresses to audition in Hawleyville, Indiana for two of Hollywood's most sought after roles, the leads in the film version of Amy Neal's best-selling novel, *HOME OF THE HEART*.'"

"That's . . ." I tried to interrupt but Herb wouldn't let me.

"Just let me tell you about the rest of the story," he said. "It says the contest is open to anyone who hasn't already had a tryout. This, my friend, is in conjunction with the finals for the regional winners, also to be held in Hawleyville. The story says the only requirements are that contestants must be under twenty-five years old and must have had no previous experience in films or on the Broadway stage. And allow me to quote Foshay: 'We want every young person dreaming of a movie career to have the opportunity to see the dream come true.'"

"When," I asked, "is this competition to be held?"

"A week from Monday," said Herb.

That was the date set for the final auditioning of the regional winners, all right, and all I could do was groan.

"Did you know anything about this until now?" Gardner asked.

"No," I admitted. "I didn't."

"Well, I don't know whether that's good or bad." The frost on Herb Gardner's voice made my ear tingle. "I'm glad you aren't a party to this, but I'm disappointed, too. I thought you were going to get control of this press agency of Foshay's and turn it into a dignified and constructive promotional program in keeping with the high quality of the novel and the movie we want to see produced from it. Do you realize that this blanket invitation is going to have Hawleyville swarming with nuts who think they are actors? It'll be nothing but a publicity circus, a convention of kooks and beatniks."

"I suppose so." I was too shaken to disagree.

"Lee, I had hoped you would move in on this situation and get control of it." There was more remorse than anger in Herb's voice now. "But so far that hasn't happened."

"I'm sorry, Herb." That was as true a statement as I'd ever made. "All I can say is that I'll keep trying."

I would have liked to have asked him how I was supposed to get control of it when I didn't have any authority, when I was only an appendage, someone who could make recommendations but not issue orders. But what was the use? He would only repeat that it was my job to *find* a way to run the show. Right then I would have chucked the whole business, but I was in too deep and the prospects for the future of Lee Medford Associates were too enticing, if I could stick with Herb Gardner until he got control of Foshay Productions. Then there was Amy Neal. I had a feeling she needed me, if that made any difference.

"Herb," I said, "you're the one with the influence in Foshay Productions. Could you put pressure on Foshay to cancel the auditions?"

"Don't think I haven't tried, my friend," he said. "But never mind that; you just keep trying to get a little dignity into that outfit."

I promised.

After I had showered, shaved, and had breakfast I felt strong enough to tackle Frankie Moline.

"Lee baby." He was bubbling. "How's it going?"

"Terrible." I told him why.

"Oh that." His tone dismissed the auditions as of no importance.

"I thought you were interested only in the *Focus* magazine project, that's why I didn't talk to you first about the auditions. That's a separate deal, and they won't amount to much anyway. That announcement in the papers was just a little something to keep people aware of the fact there's going to be a movie called HOME OF THE HEART. Hell, man, an audition in a place like Hawleyville won't draw flies. A few kids from around there maybe. All the aspiring actors and actresses are on one coast or the other. What would they be doing in Indiana? Don't worry, don't worry."

"Frankie," I said, "I am worried. This thing is going to draw thousands, or at least hundreds, to Hawleyville. They'll overrun the place. What are you going to do about housing and feeding them?"

"Nothing." With his alligator shoes and his toothy smile, Frankie was still the street fighter from Brooklyn. "Let 'em take care of themselves. And, Lee baby, quit worrying. I've been in on this sort of thing often enough to know what to expect. We'll get maybe forty or fifty kids who'll show up in the morning and go home at night. It's simple, simple."

It was not simple; it was complicated, and all I was certain of at the moment was that Frankie Moline was an authentic fink.

I hung up, still cursing myself for getting booby-trapped into an arrangement that was beyond my control.

Such introspection was short lived because during the next few days I was totally occupied with writing speeches for Howard Cadman and for Amy, with arranging for the governor's appearance at the Hoosier author's dinner, with

getting a large gold-plated key for presentation on "Amy Neal Day," and with trying to keep abreast of whatever Frankie Moline might be doing to me at the moment.

Lars Johnston took over other details, such as the housing arrangements, the selection of the sites of Amy's luncheon for her classmates and the Ladies Literary Club luncheon for Amy. The luncheon choice was between the Elks Club and the basement of the First Methodist church, and Lars chose the latter because he felt "the religion bit" might give the occasions additional stature. He also got the shoe sizes of everyone who would be staying at the country club and rented golf shoes for them as well as clubs. He saw to it that there would be enough of the right brands of liquor in the bar and plenty of caddies for the golf course. He conferred with Howard Cadman on guest lists for the luncheon and dinners and worked for hours over the seating arrangements. He made a deal for construction of a speakers' stand in the courthouse park for "Amy Neal Day" and for building a photographers' stand opposite it so that the crowd would not interfere with the main business at hand—getting Amy's picture in *Focus* magazine. He hired a small orchestra to play when needed, and he ordered corsages, cigars, table flowers, playing cards, and ping pong balls. He left nothing to chance.

If Lars overlooked any detail, I couldn't think of it. There also were other things I couldn't think of, and one of them was why I decided not to fly to Los Angeles to keep a weekend date I'd made with Sandy, the television actress. I told her, and myself, that I was too busy with the Hawleyville preparations, but I was not at all sure that was the basic reason. A suspicion that I wasn't able to nail down was that my decision was vaguely connected with Amy Neal, although I did not allow any deep probing of that vein of thinking. The idea was too nebulous to stand any close inspection, and so I played golf instead.

By the middle of the next week it was time to go to Hawleyville to make the final preparations with the help of Lars, and I asked Frankie Moline to go along, too, knowing I would feel safer if he were where I could see him.

On Friday morning I was awakened by Frankie Moline who was pounding on my door at the Prairie Inn and shouting, "Let me in, quick, let me in." Thinking he must be under assault, possibly by an irate husband, I bounded to the door, but when I saw he was alone I threw myself back onto the bed and was drifting off to sleep again when he said, "Well don't just lie there."

Shaking my head and squirming around, I pulled myself into a sitting position.

"What the hell do you want?" I asked, yawning, stretching, and trying to remember why I was wherever I was.

"You got to help me." He came over and sat on the edge of the bed, and I could see he was genuinely distraught. His hair was uncombed, and he was unshaven.

"Help you do what?" Aiding Frankie Moline in anything short of suicide was against my nature.

"Help me save my job. Save my neck. Mr. Foshay's coming." He was so upset I looked at the door, half expecting to see Foshay come waddling through.

"Now?" He had my attention if not my sympathy.

"No, no." Frankie jumped up and began pacing the floor. "Tomorrow, probably. I got a phone call from him just now. He's decided to come out and take part in the Amy Neal bash."

I stretched out on the bed again. "So?" I said. "Let him come."

Frankie came around and sat on the other side of the bed so I'd have to look at him. "There's no place for him to stay." Panic oozed from every pore.

"Don't worry," I said. That was a switch: me telling Moline not to worry. "We can squeeze him in somewhere."

"Oh, for god's sake." Frankie jumped up and took a couple of steps away from me, as if he couldn't bear being near so much stupidity. "You don't just 'squeeze' Mr. Foshay in anywhere. You take care of him, then you 'squeeze' in somebody else."

"All right," I said. "We'll throw Amy Neal out of Phil Damen's suite. She can sleep on the pool table."

"Oh, my god." Moline walked over to the wall and began pounding it to dramatize his disgust, until the occupant on the other side began pounding back. "Let me explain, let me explain," he begged, turning back to me. "He won't stay at the club. Says it will be too noisy. What he wants is a nice, quiet 'suite' here at the hotel. I told him it's a fleabag, but he wouldn't listen. He likes the sound of the name, Prairie Inn; says it sounds quaint. The Prairie Inn and Hawleyville, he says, must be a 'bit of Americana' that he'd like to see. Like hell he would. His idea of roughing it is staying at a Hilton hotel. I once saw him have a temper tantrum at the Savoy in London because his towel bar wasn't heated. Keerist, my room here ain't even *got* a towel bar!"

Surveying my room with its cracked ceiling, muddy brown walls, and grey lace curtains, Moline nearly whimpered. "Wait until he sees that rope coiled under the window, he'll tie it around my neck and push me out. Wait until he decides to ring for valet service and finds there isn't even a phone. You should have heard him carry on at the Roney Plaza the time he thought the color of the bed spread clashed with the draperies."

When he sank into a chair it creaked, and I somehow managed to feel sorry for him. His fear of Foshay's wrath, though seemingly ridiculous, was real. And I'd seen enough of the movie-maker to realize that his megalomania could be a hazard to anyone who worked for him, even to an employee as loosely associated with him as I was. If he lost his

temper, my association could become a lot looser than it already was.

Crawling out of bed, I told Moline to go comb his hair and wake up Lars Johnston. Then the three of us would confront the hotel manager to see what he could provide in the way of luxury accommodations.

The manager wasn't there, and the clerk said the best room in the hotel was occupied.

"Unoccupy it," snapped Moline. "This is for Albert Foshay, president of Foshay Productions, Incorporated."

The Foshay name was enough to spur the clerk into action. He knocked on the door of the Prairie Inn's best on the fourth floor, and when no one answered he let us in with his pass key. The difference between the best and the worst in the Prairie Inn obviously was only in the size.

The room was the same as the one I had, only slightly bigger. Moline groaned. "This wouldn't do anyway," he said. "Mr. Foshay specified that it had to be on the back of the hotel, away from traffic."

"Mister," said the clerk, sucking his teeth. "There ain't no traffic in Hawleyville at night."

"You try telling that to Albert Foshay, buster," Moline said. "What's across the hall?"

The clerk showed us that room, which was the same as the one on the front, only smaller.

There was a connecting door, and Moline tried to open it. "What's next door?" he asked.

"Same as this," said the clerk.

"No suites, I suppose," said Moline.

"Naw. Just connecting rooms."

"H-m-m-m." Moline was beginning to snap back. He walked over to the window and stared across the roofs and tree tops, thinking out loud. "Mr. Foshay says he may arrive tomorrow, a day ahead of schedule, so he can 'delve into a slice of the heartland of our great country.' We got just

today, and we got to get moving." Turning back to the clerk, he said, "We'll take this one and the one next door."

"But that one's occupied," the clerk protested.

Moline handed him two \$20 bills. "Tell the occupant it's been condemned or something, and put him in another room. That money will pay his bill." He handed over another ten dollars, "For you."

"Yes sir," said the clerk as he admired Alexander Hamilton's haircut.

When the clerk was gone Moline said, "I wish I was dead, but I'm not, so I got to try something."

Even a weasel will fight when cornered, and Foshay had Frankie Moline trapped on the fourth floor of the Prairie Inn.

"This may seem crazy to you guys," he said, "but bear with me, please. I can still remember what happened after that time somebody got Mr. Foshay only a room instead of a suite at the Ambassador East in Chicago.

"After he got through raising hell with the home office three vice presidents resigned, two jumped out the window, and another joined the Peace Corps."

Pulling out a fistful of money and a packet of credit cards, Moline waved them in front of me. "With these, we may be able to save my neck. If we fail, Moline dies at dawn." His imitation of Moline before a firing squad was a dramatic masterpiece.

There was only one solution, Frankie said, and that was to remold a piece of the Prairie Inn in the image of Albert Foshay. "We got until tonight to reclaim this musty cavern."

He proposed we start by moving the furniture out into the hall so we could see what we had to work with.

Lars Johnston, who hasn't picked up anything heavier than a medium-sized blonde since he was eighteen, lacked enthusiasm.

"Jesus," he said, carrying a flower vase out of the room,

"if you hadn't rented the country club for us common people you could put Foshay in there."

"Shut up," said Moline, "and clear this place out."

Moline was knocking the bed frame apart with his shoe when the alarmed clerk reappeared.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Planting petunias," said Moline, puffing.

"I think I better call Mr. Booth, the manager," said the clerk.

"You do that," said Moline.

We had the room almost cleared when Moline, pale and frantic, came running out of the bathroom, yelling "Oh god, oh god, now I've done it, now I've done it."

My first thought was he had tried to kill himself. He held out a pill box with two compartments, one labeled "pep-up" and the other "sleep."

"I think I took a sleeping pill instead of a pep-up pill," he said, clutching his throat. "I may collapse any moment." He wobbled around the room looking for the bed that had been dismantled.

"Why don't you just take a pep pill to balance it?" asked Johnston. Lars has a head on his shoulders; it's a bit thick but it's there.

"Yeah," Moline brightened. "I'll take two."

The pep pills restored Frankie's equilibrium, but he was far from cheerful.

"Lord but I wish I had a drink," he said. "Don't go away; I'll be back in a minute."

When he returned he was carrying three bottles of Scotch. "One for each of us," he said.

Five minutes and two drinks later he was in full command. His confidence was returning and with it his native Brooklyn ingenuity.

"Take a car and drive to Indianapolis," he told Lars. "Get new furnishings for a bedroom and sitting room. Rent the

stuff, buy it, or steal it, but get it back here today. Charge everything to Foshay Productions. Call Irving Sample at the Foshay office in New York if there's any trouble. He'll authorize it or wire the money, whatever's needed. I'll be in touch with him before you get there."

With the furniture gone the rooms looked bleaker than ever, and Moline had two more drinks before he decided to redecorate.

"How about blue walls and white ceiling?" He wasn't asking me, only himself. "I should have given Lars the color scheme before he left. And we'll have to get a new rug. Now where can I get some painters in a hurry?"

Looking out the window, he saw two men painting a building a block away. "Back in a minute," he said, but it was nearly five minutes before he returned with two bewildered-looking house painters.

"You'll have to fix the plaster cracks first," Moline said, pointing to the ceiling. "You'll have to do this room, the bath, and the room next door by tonight. Like I said, I'll pay you double the going rate with time and a half after 4:00 P.M. Now let's get going, get going."

Moline had the answer to their plea that "Missus Archer" expected them to finish painting her house that day.

"I'll fix it up for you," he promised, reaching into his pocket. The painters also turned out to be admirers of Alexander Hamilton's portrait, in the right place, and Frankie gave one of them another twenty-five dollars to buy the paint. The other painter he kept at the hotel, as a hostage I guess.

Dazzled by Frankie's small bills and big talk, the painters soon were at work, but our day was hardly begun.

With me tagging along, Moline jogged down the street to the telephone company office and ordered in two phones, one of them a direct line to the hotel manager's office. The girl in the telephone office didn't know if the work could be

done immediately, but three minutes later when he came out of the manager's office Moline was smiling. So was the manager, although he wore the bewildered look of one who has just been gulled and doesn't understand how it happened. Chances are Moline represented himself as a personal representative of Alexander Graham Bell.

On the way back to the hotel, Moline remembered the bathroom. "There's no shower and no shaving light. I'll get a plumber and you find an electrician. Bring him back to the hotel with you in ten minutes." I accomplished my mission, and Moline produced his plumber, a fellow with red hair and an astonished expression.

The plumber was ripping out the bathroom wall when the hotel manager arrived.

That was the moment Moline chose to announce that he was donating the "Albert Foshay Suite" to the Prairie Inn, in appreciation of its cooperation with Foshay Productions and in recognition of its contributions to "Americana in the heartland of our great country."

Mr. Booth, the manager, said, well, he didn't know, and he guessed he had better talk to Mrs. Vernor who owned the hotel.

"You do that," said Moline. "And please clean up the lobby; it's a disgrace."

Surveying the scene, Moline decided the proceedings were not proceeding fast enough, and the ante went up to triple time if the work could be finished that day. He seemed to be getting the maximum effort from the plumber, the painters, and the electrician when the hotel owner, Mrs. Vernor, arrived.

Here, I saw, was more formidable opposition than Moline had encountered so far, and from the gracious way he greeted her I could tell he knew his back was to the wall.

"Stop, stop, stop," shouted Mrs. Vernor, and the workmen

laid down their tools, backing away as if seeking protection behind Frankie Moline.

Frankie, I must admit, stood his ground well; obviously he was more afraid of Albert Foshay than he was of Mrs. Vernor, although physically she was more frightening than the movie-maker. She was a comely woman of around forty, and I'd say that take away a few years and add a couple of pounds and she could have played tackle for the Chicago Bears.

"Mrs. Vernor, this is indeed a pleasure," said Moline in a syrupy voice that I hadn't heard before. "I've been looking forward to meeting you."

"Yes?" Mrs. Vernor still looked mad, but she also was assuming the bemused mien of the painters, the plumber, and the electrician as they all adjusted to their association with Frankie Moline. "What's going on here?"

"That is why I asked you to come up," said Moline as he took Mrs. Vernor's arm and began steering her toward the door. "Let's find some place where we can talk about this privately; I have a pleasant surprise for you."

At the door it seemed to occur to Mrs. Vernor that she was being given the bum's rush, Emily Post style, from her own hotel, and she called back over her shoulder, "Don't you men do another thing until I get back."

As she and Frankie vanished down the hall the last words I heard were, "Mrs. Vernor, I'm absolutely amazed, simply amazed to find that one so young and charming as yourself should be the owner of a successful enterprise like the Prairie Inn, this delightful bit of Americana in the heartland . . ."

With the fading of Frankie's soothing voice, I could not help but reflect that whatever else might be said of him here was a genuine charlatan, con man, hypocrite, double-dealer, swindler, stinker, and fink.

And I was glad of it.

Only a charlatan, con man, hypocrite, double-dealer,

swindler, stinker, and fink could explain this situation to the satisfaction of Mrs. Vernor. For once, I was betting on Frankie; I had confidence in him.

Five minutes later my faith was rewarded when he returned with Mrs. Vernor who said, "Go ahead, men, there was only a slight misunderstanding."

Turning to Frankie, she smiled. "Anything I can do for you, just let me know," she said, "anything at all."

"That's very kind of you, Mrs. Vernor," said Frankie, looking upon her as if she were some lovely nymph who had enraptured him in a woodland dell.

"Perhaps you could have the lobby freshened up a bit," he said as if he were asking for her hand in marriage.

After Frankie had maneuvered her back into the corridor and hastened her on her way I remembered that I had skipped breakfast and was coming close to missing lunch.

Moline and I went around to the Hi-Lo, and while we were there he made notes on further ways to transform the Prairie Inn into the Hawleyville Hilton.

"A bellhop," he said, "we got to have a bellhop. In a uniform. Will you take care of that? Maybe you can hire some loafer from the pool hall or from the benches around the courthouse and rent a uniform from the high school band."

He also wrote himself a reminder to rent the rooms on both sides of the Foshay suite and across the hall.

"Mr. Foshay hates noise," he said.

He also asked me to buy or rent two air conditioners and get them installed and also to find fifty feet of new hall carpeting to run from the elevator to the door of the Foshay suite.

If you've ever tried to hire a bellhop, find a uniform, buy fifty feet of hall carpeting, and get immediate installation of two air conditioners in a small town, you will understand why it took me most of the afternoon to accomplish these chores. I finally had to call Indianapolis for the carpeting,

and the young hood I hired at the pool hall held me up for fifteen dollars a day, plus the promise of generous tips from Mr. Foshay who was to be his only patron. Miss Laskey at the high school helped me get the band uniform, although I must say she didn't do a very lady-like job of containing her amusement when she found out why I wanted it. In fact, she laughed like hell.

When I got back to the Prairie Inn the manager and the clerk both were pushing scrubbing mops around the lobby. Neither seemed to be enjoying his work, but Mrs. Vernor, who was overseeing the project, favored me with a smile.

The telephone installer was putting in the phones and Moline was raising the roof because the instruments didn't match the walls.

"This ain't a big city where they got everything," the installer protested. "This ain't Indianapolis, mister."

The painters were well along with the work, but now Moline was looking for a plasterer to fix the bathroom wall that had been torn out for the shower. He had bought a new toilet and wash bowl which were sitting in the middle of what was to be the sitting room.

I suggested we go get some dinner, but Frankie said he was going to stay on the telephone until he found a plasterer.

While I was eating alone at the Hi-Lo, Lars Johnston came in.

"The furniture's being unloaded now," he said. "Cost a fortune."

"Did you get window drapes?" I asked. "Moline was worried."

"Yeah," he nodded, "drapes, rugs, sheets, pillow cases, blankets, towels, a portable bar, lamps, ash trays, wastebaskets, the works."

When we went back to the hotel we found Moline standing in the middle of what was now quite an attractive sitting room. He was shouting, "Flowers!"

"I forgot the flowers," he cried. "The man's nuts about flowers."

He started calling Indianapolis florists, and it was nearly an hour before he found a greenhouse that was still open.

"What kind do I want? Wait a minute."

With his hand over the mouthpiece, he said, "Gimme the names of some flowers."

"Petunias," I said, and he repeated that into the phone.

"Begonias," suggested Lars.

With our help, Moline also asked for snapdragons, camellias, gardenias, roseola, and carnations. And neither he nor the florist seemed to know that along with the flowers he had ordered a skin rash—roseola.

"I don't know how many," he said. "Would a hundred dollars buy enough to stink up two small rooms?"

Assured that the fragrance would be noticeable, Moline gave instructions for getting the flowers to Hawleyville the first thing the next day and promised to wire the money at once.

"Whew," Frankie mumbled, hanging up the phone and wiping his face with a handkerchief. The strain was beginning to tell. He had circles under his eyes, lines around his mouth, and a generally bedraggled look.

"Why don't you go have something to eat?" I suggested.

"Naw," he said. "I'll just have a couple of stomach pills, an aspirin, and another drink. Where's my bottle." He found it on top of the new bar. "Remind me in the morning," he said, "to fill up this private saloon with Vichy water. That's all the man can drink."

Lars had been edging toward the door. "If you don't have anything special for me to do," he said, "I've got a date."

"So?" I was curious. "Who with?"

"I don't know," he confessed. "Some broad I met down in the lobby where she was bossing the cleanup operation. Looks as if she used to play tackle for the Chicago Bears."

As Lars hurried away to his rendezvous, Moline laughed for the first time all day, kicked off his shoes, and sank into the Swedish modern easy chair that was part of the refurbishing program. He stretched and yawned, and he might have dozed off if one of the painters hadn't come in from the bathroom and said, "Chief, we ain't going to be able to finish that job in the can."

Moline leaped to his feet with a cry of anguish that must have shaken babes in their beds blocks away. "Why not, why not?" he yelled.

"Paint won't stick to wet plaster," the painter said. "We got to wait until the plaster dries."

"Paint it, paint it," Moline yelled. "If it sticks until next Wednesday, that's all I care."

"Won't last," the painter mumbled as he returned to work.

While Moline had been urging the decorator into shoddy craftsmanship, I had been staring out the window.

"Frankie, look here," I said, and I pointed across the street to a large, bright, and red light in the hallway of a house.

"No, no, no!" Frankie pounded the sides of his head with his closed fists. "It can't be; it just can't be."

He ran to the door of the bath and asked the painters. "Does that red light over there mean what I think it means?"

"Sure does," said one of them, with a touch of civic pride. "Busiest house in this part of the state."

Moline turned back to me. "Come on," he pleaded, "kill me. I don't want to be alive when Mr. Foshay finds out I gave him a room overlooking a whore house."

He walked across the room and threw himself into a chair. "Five years ago," he recalled, "I got the man a hotel reservation in Dallas, and the rooms overlooked a parking lot. He's still mumbling about it. So think what he'll say about this."

With a trembling finger he pointed in the direction of the beacon of lust, summoning the lewd, the crude, and the

stewed. "He'll never forget it, never. 'Frankie Moline?' he'll say years from now. 'Oh yeah, I remember him. He's the schnook who got me that hotel room with the splendid view of a cat house.'"

He took a long swallow from the Scotch bottle and began slipping on his shoes. "Come on," he said, "we're going to rent us a house of ill-repute."

Moline rang the bell, and the door was opened a crack by a blowsy, bleached blonde in a wrap-around dress obviously selected for its access and egress.

"What do you want fellows?" she asked.

"We have a business proposition," said Moline.

"Doesn't everybody?" Oh boy, comedy too. "Who sent you?"

"The, ah, painters," Moline said.

"Well come on in." She opened the door wide. "Thought maybe you was state cops. We don't get much necktie trade, except some weekends."

"We'd like to rent your house until next Wednesday night." Moline was all business. "How much?"

"You mean furnished, girls and all?"

Moline nodded. "The works."

"Oh good, a convention. My name's Cindy."

"No," said Moline, "it's not a convention."

"You mean there's just you two?" A skeptical frown creased Cindy's brow.

"Yeah."

"Well now fellas, wait a minute." Cindy grew thoughtful. "We got five girls and two extras on weekends. And until next Wednesday..." She counted on her fingers. "Good lord, that's five days. I don't see how just you two..."

"Excuse me," I interrupted. "We don't want the girls. We just want you to close down, all go away for a vacation, and turn out that light." I pointed to the hall beacon.

"Yes," Moline echoed. "Turn out that light."

"Fellas, we can't just shut up and go away, like that." She snapped her fingers.

"Why not?" Moline asked. "I'll pay you two hundred bucks. And all you have to do is to stay out of town for a few days."

"Say, wait a minute." Cindy was suspicious now. "You fellas bringing in some competition?"

"No, no," Moline assured her. "It's just that we, ah, well, we, ah, there's somebody we don't want to know about this place, that's all." I couldn't blame Moline for stumbling around; it was hard to explain, even for him.

"I'll tell you," Cindy said, "the money's all right, but we couldn't close down without an okay from Mr. Harkins."

"Who's Mr. Harkins?" Moline was getting impatient.

"Ray Harkins, the police chief."

"The police chief?" Moline and I may not have been in tune, but we were loud.

"Of course." Cindy couldn't dig us at all. "We don't do nothing until we get an okay from Chief Harkins. You know, like not opening on Sundays until after church is out, stuff like that. And he likes to have us open on weekends. Saves him a lot of trouble."

"The boys come in from the mines and they got only one thing on their minds. You know how it is after you been down in a mine all week."

The way Moline and I nodded you'd think we both had spent half our lives in the pits.

"So if the boys don't get what they're looking for, they start getting nasty, break things up. That's why the chief says the girls and me perform a civic service, sort of like a public utility. He says we make a genuine contribution to the maintenance of law and order. Once he said he was going to nominate me for the annual award given by the

Hawleyville Boosters Club to the person who has contributed most to community welfare, but I guess he was only kidding. At least I ain't got a medal. No, fellas, I can't do a thing about closing without approval from Chief Harkins. If he says it's all right, then it's okay with me."

"Where can we find him?" Moline asked.

"Well," said Cindy, "if I was to look for the police chief I just might try the police station." She was a barrel of laughs.

Moline and I retreated to the sidewalk and regrouped. "Lee baby," he said, clutching my arm, "wait a minute. I got to sort this thing out. You and I are on our way to see the chief of police. Right?"

"Right."

"And when we find the chief of police we are going to ask his permission to *close* a house of prostitution. Right?"

"Right."

"It's really happening?"

"It's happening."

Moline turned and looked once more at that beckoning light in Cindy's hallway before making further comment. Although he looked as if he had a great deal he wanted to say, all that came out was, "My god."

He was struck dumb all the way to the station where we found Hawleyville's night police force reading a detective story. Moline said we'd like to see the chief, and the police force said why don't we go out to his house, and Moline said this was official business, and the police force said there's the phone, call him up.

Moline got Chief Harkins on the phone and this time he laid it on the line, explaining he didn't want Foshay to have a room with a view of the red-light district. Chief Harkins said to stick around and he'd be right down.

When he got there he confirmed what Cindy had said

about her contributions to law and order in Hawleyville and added that it would be a lot of trouble for him, personally, if the establishment were closed during the weekend. Somewhere along the line I began to get the drift.

"Suppose," I said, "that we paid Cindy two hundred and fifty dollars instead of two hundred dollars. Would that make a difference?"

"How about three hundred dollars?" The chief was busy shining his star with the sleeve of his coat.

"You got a deal," said Moline.

"Not me," said the chief, inspecting the polishing job. "Cindy. I'll call her."

When we returned to Cindy's pleasure palace with the money she said, "Thanks, fellas, how about one on the house?"

"No thanks," said Moline, with a trace of bitterness, "we ain't got permission from the chief."

Once more we stopped on the sidewalk to review our position.

"Damn shakedown," growled Frankie.

Me, I didn't even laugh, although the phenomenon of Frankie Moline, man-about-Broadway and genuine charlatan, con man, hypocrite, double-dealer, swindler, stinker, and fink, being bested by a country cop and a rustic madam was not without its elements of humor.

"A bit of Americana," I observed. "A slice of the heartland of our great country."

What Frankie said wasn't very nice.

The painters were finishing up as we returned to the Prairie Inn, and as we waited for them to leave Frankie finished off his bottle of Scotch and had a go at mine.

"I guess that does it," said one of the painters as they collected their gear.

"Thanks fellows," said Moline, paying off and pressing an extra twenty dollars on each of them. "Great job, great job."

He watched as they closed the door behind them, then he sank slowly to the couch and passed out.

After pulling off his shoes and putting a pillow under his head I left him there. It seemed appropriate that the glittering new Albert Foshay suite of the Prairie Inn should be christened by a drunken press agent.

Chapter 14

THE next day was Saturday, and, as much as it disturbed me, I had to let Frankie Moline out of my sight.

Lars Johnston and I were flying to New York so we could accompany the *Focus* crew and a clutch of columnists back to Hawleyville. The original plan had been for Moline to fly to the Coast and return with the Hollywood crowd, but Albert Foshay's decision to come to Hawleyville had forced a revision. Now it was decided, by Moline, that he should remain to greet Foshay and leave the escort job to Foshay Productions' Hollywood publicity office.

I said good-bye to Frankie, regretfully; with twenty-four hours to himself in Hawleyville, he might undermine the entire concept of our project and put me so deep in the hole with Herb Gardner that this time he might decide to fill it in on top of me, without giving me the chance to claw my way out.

"Frankie," I advised, "just relax."

"Relax," he gibed. "Here I am waiting for *the man*, and he says to relax. Did Floyd Patterson relax before Liston? Was Wellington relaxed at Waterloo? Did Marie Antoinette relax while waiting on the . . ."

He was still mocking me when I drove away, but by the time Lars and I boarded the plane in Indianapolis I had forgotten about Frankie Moline and devoted myself to more pertinent matters, such as whether I had been out of my mind when I conceived the plan for bringing Amy and *Focus* magazine together in Hawleyville. From ten thousand feet in the air over the Indiana countryside, the answer seemed to be yes.

The trouble, as I saw it, was that I had moved too fast at the start, setting up the project before I knew Amy Neal or Frankie Moline and before I knew what I had gotten into. Amy was too genuine, candid, and frank for this exploitation of her ties to Hawleyville, and Frankie was too crafty, tricky, and deceptive. She was sure to try to raise the scheme to her own level of integrity while Frankie would be dragging it down to his milieu of guile, hokum, and razzmatazz. And there I was in the middle, an easy target to be shot down by either side. I didn't like it.

We were over Pennsylvania when Lars asked, "What's the problem?"

"Problem?" I had been probing so far into the future that I was jarred by the return to the present.

"Yeah, problem." Lars was puzzled. "You haven't said a word since we took off. What's bugging you?"

"Taradiddle," I said.

"What?"

"Taradiddle," I repeated. "That's what Amy calls the grey area, in between truth and outright dishonesty. That's her word for hocus-pocus, hokum, flimflam, the old malarkey."

"Seems to me," observed Lars, "the world turns on taradiddle. And why does it worry you?"

"Because that's what we're going to have back there in Hawleyville next week. Pure taradiddle. With Amy involved, that's dangerous. And Lars, if you'll forgive me, just this once, for being rude, let me wait until later to try to explain all this. I'm not sure I understand it myself, and there's some thinking I've got to do."

"Sure." He shrugged and went back to inspecting the pictures in *Playboy*. Lars never missed an opportunity to improve himself.

The kind of deep thinking I had to do—picking over the past, present, and future and lining it up with motives, causes and effects, and basic principles—was strange to me, and I was still trying to find my way when we landed at Kennedy International Airport. Silently, I followed Lars to the baggage counter, and while we were waiting there I made up my mind.

"Lars," I said, "you go into town. I'm going to Laketon to see Amy, and I'll phone you around noon tomorrow. You can shepherd the New York gang to Hawleyville tomorrow afternoon as planned."

"How about you?" Lars was dubious.

"I'll fly down with Amy," I said, "and we'll meet you in Hawleyville tomorrow night."

Would we? I didn't know for sure, but there was no point in upsetting Lars further. He was alarmed enough already.

"Lee," he asked, "is there something going on I don't know about? Why should you have to rush off to Minnesota now?"

"It's nothing," I assured him. "I just want to talk to Amy again before she runs into this publicity hoopla. That's all."

Lars did not look convinced, and from the deep furrows in his brow I could tell he was content. With him, problems were like women; he was at ease only when they both came

in all shapes and sizes and when there were plenty of them.

Because it was late, I couldn't get a direct plane to Minneapolis, and I had to settle for a flight to Chicago where I spent the night in a motel near the airport and went on early Sunday morning.

That gave me more time to review the Hawleyville setup, placing Amy Neal with her inflexible integrity in juxtaposition with the glossy new Albert Foshay suite, the phoney bellboy from the poolhall, the hokum of the talent contest, the bought-and-paid-for "Amy Neal Day," the brassy gall of Frankie Moline, and the imposed ill will of *Argus* editor Ed Keating. I had the feeling that the results would be chaotic and that Amy would be hurt, not physically but psychically. Or was it that I was afraid the one who would be hurt was me? Not psychically but professionally. The answers eluded me, but I had decided I wanted Amy to pull out.

Once a person gets snarled up emotionally, everything seems to go wrong, and I was annoyed, but not surprised, because my rental car wasn't ready at the airport. Time was important now, and rather than wait, I took a taxi to Amy's house in Laketon.

"Whups," Old Jug Ears cried as he met me at the door. He greeted me cordially, almost like a member of the family, but when he called over his shoulder, "Hey Amy, your flack's here," it occurred to me that I really didn't care much for Arthur Phillips. He was too damn, well, he was just too damn much.

Amy was dressed for traveling—high heels, hose, a smart dress, earrings, and a saucy hat that made me revise earlier appraisals. She wasn't really pretty; beautiful was more like it.

"This is a surprise," she said, smiling as if she were pleased, and that was something I liked about her; if she seemed pleased she *was*. If she hadn't wanted to see me, I'd have

known that too. "My bags are packed, and I'm ready to go this afternoon. Did you come all the way out here just to fly down with me?"

"Not entirely," I said, and then with a frankness that surprised me, I added: "In fact, not at all. I want to talk to you about Hawleyville."

"Come on in," she said, looking puzzled but leading me into the living room with Old Jug Ears trailing along.

Amy and I sat on the couch with Arthur across from us on a straight-backed chair that was much too small for him. It wasn't easy getting started, especially with him sitting there looking as if he were about to leap into a handstand at any moment, and I tried beating about the bush in my most debonair manner for a while in the hopes that he'd get bored and go lift his weights or whatever it was he did around the house to keep in shape. But he didn't budge, and finally Amy said, "What about Hawleyville?"

"I don't think you should go down there." I must have blurted it out because Amy blinked and Old Jug Ears said, "Whups."

Amy, recovering first, asked why not.

"It's not the right setup for you," I said.

"But it's your setup," Amy pointed out. "You thought it up."

"The original concept was fine, but somehow it got away from me," I said, wishing Arthur would quit nodding in agreement. "'Amy Neal Day' will be all Hollywood, all razz-matazz and ring-a-ding-ding. What's wrong is that it's not right for Amy Neal."

"That's what I've said all along," said Arthur, looking smug. I wanted to suggest he go do some push-ups or stand on his head, in a corner, but all I did was wait for Amy to finish taking a long and thoughtful drag on a cigarette before she spoke.

"I promised I'd be there, and now everyone is expecting me," she said. "How could I refuse to go now?"

"You could get sick," I suggested. "Virus, stomach flu, sprained ankle, bronchitis, allergy. Take your pick. If you don't like any of those I can ask my secretary to lend us one of hers. She's sampled more ailments than there are in Columbia Presbyterian Hospital."

Amy only shook her head, smiled, and said, "I feel fine."

"Please." I was trying hard. "Please don't go."

"But why not?" She was frowning. "I don't understand."

"It's been blown out of all proportion," I said. "At the start it was just an idea to have you visit there with Walter Driscoll and to get some pictures. But there were a lot of things I didn't know then."

"Such as?"

"I didn't know Frankie Moline or Albert Foshay or have any idea how they would move in on the scheme and try to take it over, with the talent contest and all that. And I didn't know I was going to get so carried away in trying to compete with Moline—to keep him from stealing the show—that I'd be injecting banquets, speeches, cocktail parties, and all this subsidiary hoopla. I didn't know about Ed Keating and his firebrand anti-Amy editorials, and I didn't know about Aunt Charlotte and her libel suit. Now, I feel that I've made a mistake, and I want you to call it off because I'm afraid you'll be disappointed and disgusted with what goes on there."

Amy rested her elbow on a knee and her chin on her hand and stared at me for a long, long moment before she asked: "Why don't *you* call it off?"

"Well, ah, it's just that I, ah, can't. I've gone too far, involved too many people, made too many plans. I'm stuck with it."

"Me too." She was resolute.

"All right." I surrendered.

I was disappointed, not so much with Amy's decision as with myself. All along I'd doubted my motives in asking Amy to withdraw, and now, more than ever, I was wondering if I really hadn't been asking her to get me off the hook, to rescue me from a mess of my own making by walking out on the whole show. Was I concerned about Amy, or myself?

"Whups!" Old Jug Ears cut off my reverie. "It's time we got going to the ball game. Where's Randy?"

"He was up in his room a few minutes ago," Amy said. "I don't think he feels very good. I wonder if he should play today; he looks a little pale to me."

"Now whups there," said Arthur. "Pre-game butterflies are nothing. Just mean he's emotionally ready for the game."

Arthur bounded out of the room to look for Randy, and Amy said, "It's the Little League. Randy is playing this year for the first time, and his first game is this afternoon. Arthur is the coach of the team. I think there'll be just about enough time to go to the game before the plane leaves. I'm going to take my car to the park and then drive straight to the airport from there. Why don't you come along, and we'll go to the airport together?"

I said that would be fine. Now that I knew Amy couldn't be dissuaded I was regaining some of my enthusiasm for the Hawleyville trip. "How about Arthur?" I asked. "Isn't he going to Indiana with you?"

She shook her head. "He can't make it. His firm is having its annual regional salesman's meeting at Cedar Rapids Monday and Tuesday, and Arthur feels he has to be there. Anyway, the day after the sales meeting they have a golf tournament every year, and he doesn't want to miss that."

I said I'd be glad to see that she didn't get lost in Hawleyville, and she said that was very nice of me, and we sat there staring at each other until Arthur and Randy appeared. In a baseball uniform, the boy seemed frail. "I feel kind of sick,"

he said, rubbing his stomach, but Old Jug Ears had the answer for that:

"Whups now, run out and get in the car. I'll be there as soon as I find my cap."

While Amy went upstairs to make sure she had everything she needed for the trip to Hawleyville and Arthur rummaged through a closet looking for his cap, I called Lars and told him Amy and I would see him at the Hawleyville Country Club during the evening. I also had time to stand in the living room, once more surveying Arthur's trophies, and it occurred to me that while my motives may have been mixed in offering Amy the chance to withdraw on the grounds that she didn't belong in that carnival atmosphere I was not at all sure, either, that she belonged in Laketon—with the golf tournaments, the bowling league, the Little League, and the League of Women Voters.

At the ball park Amy and I found seats in the bleachers behind the bench of the Giants, Randy's team. The opponents were called the Cubs, and they seemed to be not quite as polished as the Giants, who were awful.

It was the first game of the season for both teams, and the first game anywhere for some of the players. They took turns dropping the ball, throwing it away, or kicking it around the infield. Every time the Giants made an error Arthur Phillips would holler "whups," tug at his cap, and move a couple of inches farther down the bench from his players, as if hoping to disassociate himself from the whole enterprise.

I almost felt sorry for him because I knew how such ineptness on the playing field must sear his All-American soul, but I felt sorrier for the players. Every last one of them had a mother in the stands, and some had grandmothers and aunts too.

Every time bat met ball the air was rent by a single shriek of joy from the batter's mother which inevitably overlapped the ensuing maternal cry of anguish as the fielder muffed

another one. Once as the second baseman of the Cubs awaited a high pop fly, his mother offered her moral support in authoritarian tones by warning, "William, don't you *dare* drop that!" So William dropped it. The ball landed in the dirt beside him, and in his despair he gave it a kick deep into right field. As a base-runner scored from second the general hubbub was pierced by a single soprano voice crying, "William!" I'll bet he wasn't allowed to watch television for the rest of the week.

Most of the time Amy sat quietly, blanching only when Randy was at bat or when the ball went toward him in right field. Then, her knuckles would grow white as she squeezed her purse, and once, when I heard her murmur, "Oh, God," I suspected she was praying.

Randy didn't give her much cause for either acclaim or censure. At the plate he merely stood there, bat on shoulder, and watched the balls go by. Once he walked and once he was called out on strikes. Then he was hit by a pitched ball. As he trotted to first, Amy broke her silence by turning to me and proclaiming proudly, "Nice play." In the field Randy saw little action because the Cubs were all righthanded hitters. The only time he was forced to join the play was in the third inning when a blooper sailed his way, and he raced toward it. At the last moment he saw he was running in too far, tried to check his stride, tripped and fell forward as the ball hit him on the shoulder and bounced in front of him. Wildly, he clutched at the ball, got a hand on it, and fell on his face. The umpire called the batter out, and Amy was on her feet. "Attaboy, Randy, attaboy," she cried. "That was great," she said, and I agreed. It was great for Randy that the ball hadn't hit him on the head.

As the game went into the last half of the final inning the Cubs had six more errors than the Giants but they also had two more runs, 16-14. After two Giants had struck out and a

walk and a two-base error had put men on second and third, Randy Phillips was up.

He plodded to the plate, dragging his bat behind him, with all the verve and vivacity of a condemned man. Arthur Phillips was on his feet shouting, "Hit it, boy, just hit it!" In this league any kind of a hit was sure to bring both runners home and tie up the ball game.

Randy's stance at the plate was like that of a man waiting for a bus, anxious but not hopeful.

The first pitch sailed past while Randy's bat rested securely on his shoulder.

"Strike," cried the umpire.

"Swing, Randy, swing," bawled Old Jug Ears.

"Ohoo," moaned Amy, ever so softly.

The second pitch was a floater, right up the middle. Randy gave it his earnest attention, but his bat never twitched.

"Strike two," said the umpire.

"Swing, damn it, swing," pleaded papa.

"Please hit it," whispered Amy.

Pitch number three was a slow ball, so slow I wasn't sure it would get all the way to the plate, but eventually it did and went over just above the knees while Randy watched it pass as if it were some interesting specimen of nature.

"You're out," shouted the umpire.

"Poor boy." Amy started toward him, but Old Jug Ears was a couple of strides ahead of her.

"Damn it, boy," he shouted. "Next time I say 'swing,' you swing!"

With a sob, Randy dropped his bat, turned and ran as Amy planted herself in front of her husband. "Arthur Phillips," she shouted, "you're a bastard."

For a moment I thought she was going to slug him with her purse, and I was disappointed when she strode away to look for Randy, who had vanished.

"We better leave," I said, catching up with her. "We'll miss our plane."

"All right, let's go." She was grim, and as we whirled out of the park onto the highway we were hitting 60 in a 30-mile-per-hour zone. Within a mile, though, she cut the speed, and a couple of miles farther we were barely moving.

At an intersection, she pulled off the road and stopped. "I'm sorry," she told me, "but I've got to go back. I must see if Randy is all right, and I shouldn't have talked to Arthur that way. I'll be at the airport within an hour and a half; you get us on a later plane."

"Well, ah," I muttered, meaning, "how about me?"

"You'll have to hitchhike or something." She pointed to a gas station. "Try in there; maybe they can help. I'm sorry."

"I'll make out," I said, and I really was trying to understand, although I couldn't see any actual harm in calling Arthur Phillips a bastard.

I got out of the car and took my bags too because I wasn't sure when, if ever, I'd be seeing Amy Neal again.

"I'm sorry," she said again before she whirled the car into a U-turn, almost colliding with a bus.

In the gas station I called a taxi.

One hour and twenty-four minutes later Amy arrived at the airport. She waved, and as she came toward me her step was so light she was almost skipping.

Now I am not the Casanova that Foshay and Moline seemed to think, but without consulting Dr. Kinsey or Havelock Ellis I was aware of the nature of Amy's reconciliation with Arthur. She was slightly flushed, her eyes were bright, and she was wearing that Gioconda smile.

"How's everything at home?" I asked, as if I didn't know.

"Just jim-dandy," she said. "Just wonderful."

Old Jug Ears, I gathered, must be pretty good at indoor sports, too.

"Let's go," I said, steering her toward the exit. "Our plane's loading."

After we found our seats I complained that I was exhausted and pretended to sleep for the entire trip. I didn't feel like talking.

Nor did I want to think about Amy and Old Jug Ears, but I couldn't help it.

Chapter 15

AS THE car headlights focused on the entrance of the Hawleyville Country Club my first thought was that the building was on fire. A crowd was milling around the door and overflowing onto the steps and the lawn in front of the clubhouse.

"What's this?" Amy asked. "Bargain night?"

"Beats me," I said. "It's almost midnight, too."

"Oh, I know," said Amy, "they're waiting for Cinderella."

I parked the car, and we went into the club through a side door. The door to the lobby from that hallway was locked, although I could hear voices, dozens of them, on the other side. We went back through the dining room and into the bar where I found Lars Johnston, Walter Driscoll, and the other guests from New York and Los Angeles. Irish, the *Focus* photographer, was there, sitting in a corner. He looked sober, and glum.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"We're under siege," said Lars.

"Candidates for the Foshay auditions?"

He nodded. "I said this would happen," he added.

"Where's Moline?" I asked.

"He's in town," said Lars, "trying to get police help."

"From whom?" I laughed. "The one-man night police force?" Although this was no laughing matter, the Hawleyville police department was.

Lars shrugged. "What do you suggest?"

"Is there a way to get a look at the lobby without being mobbed?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "On the second floor there are doors to the stairs that we locked, but there's glass in them."

He led me up a back stairway to the point where I could look down into the lobby. The sight was far from reassuring.

Humanity, and some of its imitators, were everywhere. There was, for instance, the hulking youth with hair flowing to his shoulders who was sitting on the stairway, strumming a guitar and singing to himself, oblivious of the hubbub. There was the dirty-faced girl with her hair done up like a bird's nest who was wearing a baggy sweat shirt emblazoned with the words "Old Siwash Necking Team." Her feet were bare, and she was sitting on a step paring her toenails with a hunting knife she had taken from its sheath on the belt she wore around her waist. There were the usual types you see around Greenwich Village and Provincetown, the lunatic fringe of the art world, the caricatures of mankind.

There were others, and many of them looked reasonably normal. They were tall and short, fat and lean, pretty and homely, vivacious and sultry, blonde and brunette, neat and sloppy, cocky and diffident, noisy and quiet. Some were too young and some too old, but they all had a single goal—one of the lead roles in Albert Foshay's newest extravaganza in color, *HOME OF THE HEART*.

"How many are there?" I asked Lars.

"At least a couple hundred," he said. "Probably more."

"Have you tried to clear the place out?"

"Lord yes," Lars said. "Moline announced several times that the tryouts would be held in the morning and asked them to come back then, but they won't leave. Everyone wants to be first in line."

"How did Moline make the announcements?"

"Over the amplifying system," he said. "It's one they use for paging members, that kind of thing."

We went back to the bar, rounded up the casting director and his secretary, and the Foshay press agent from the West Coast, whose name was Manny Quinlan. Then I found the manager of the club and arranged to use the public address system and the dining room. Our task force was joined by Frankie Moline and the Hawleyville night police force, who looked uneasy.

"Lee baby," Moline cried, "ain't it great?"

"What?"

"This mob." He was bubbling. "Shows what kind of interest we've stirred up in HOME OF THE HEART. Foshay will love it. Hey Manny?"

"Check," said Manny.

"This audition business was going to draw only forty or fifty kids," I reminded him.

"Lee baby, I was wrong, and I'm glad of it." Moline always had an answer. "This shows the tremendous pulling power of the movie even before we've got a cast."

"All right," I said. "Now you get on the horn and announce to those undiscovered Garbos and Gables that we are going to let them into the dining room one at a time. There we will take their names and they will draw a number. Numbers one through twenty-five will report back here at 9:00 A.M. for auditions in the order of their numbers, twenty-five through fifty at 10:00 A.M., and so on. Put the cop at the door to control them, and make it clear that being first to

register doesn't help their chances any. It all depends on the draw, and the last one to be auditioned has as much chance as the first. Now get going."

By 2:00 A.M. we had everyone registered and the last aspirant had vanished somewhere into the night, some on motorcycles, some in sports cars, more in wheezing jalopies, several on bicycles, and some on foot. One young man, accompanied by three girls, left in a chauffeur-driven Cadillac.

"Where's Foshay?" I asked Moline as the last of the contestants drew a number.

"He decided not to come until tomorrow."

"Is everyone else here?" I asked.

"Apparently so," he said, "including a couple I didn't know were on the list, those two broads who were out in Minnesota with us, the one who's built like Mt. Whitney and the other who looks like Miss Flatsies of 1928."

"Janice Carlisle and Norma Ackley," I said. "Amy thought her agent ought to be invited. George Schaffer asked that Norma be included. Maybe he figured it would be her big chance to find a man."

"Her with a man?" Moline was appalled. "No man in his right mind would get within ten feet of that one."

"Yes," I agreed, recalling that night at the hotel in Minneapolis, "no man in his right mind."

Because of the expanded guest list, I had to share a room with Johnston, and I fell into one of the beds before Lars appeared. I was just dozing off when I heard the door open and Lars exclaim, "Oh, damn." He must have forgotten I was to be there because there was a whispered conference before the closing of the door and the fading of footsteps, half of which definitely were feminine.

It was beginning to get light when Lars returned, and it seemed I had just dozed off again when the phone beside the bed began ringing.

"Mr. Medford you've got to do something." It was the club manager.

"About what?" Squinting, I could see that the sun was up.

"Look out the window and you'll see." He hung up.

I looked, and I saw. They were everywhere. On the steps, on the lawn, in the parking lot, on the golf course. They were tall and short, fat and lean, pretty and homely, vivacious and sultry, blonde and brunette, neat and sloppy, cocky and diffident, noisy and quiet. Only they were not the same tall, short, fat, lean, pretty, homely, vivacious, sultry, blonde, brunette, neat, sloppy, cocky, diffident, noisy, quiet ones I had seen the night before. The day shift had arrived.

What was to happen when this mob met the crowd that had been guaranteed a hearing earlier? At worst, a riot; at best, chaos.

Even in my early morning semi-stupor I knew we had to work fast, and I routed out Lars, Moline, the director, and the casting director. By 7:30 we had another numbers draw going, using different colored paper this time, and before nine o'clock we had the entrants divided between the whites (who had registered the night before) and the yellows, who had just drawn their numbers.

Then, with Frankie Moline directing traffic over the p.a. system, we had the white slips line up for auditions in the dining room and the yellows in the library. The casting director was in charge of the whites, and the director was head judge of the yellows. Still they came, and Lars Johnston stationed himself near the gate, handing out white and yellow slips to the new arrivals. Nobody had time to count, but there must have been hundreds.

Breakfast was served to our guests in the lounge, behind locked doors.

"How can I be a judge, when two auditions are going on at the same time?" asked Amy.

"Take your pick," I told her and went off to call the police

because the greenskeeper was complaining that motorcycles were racing around the golf course.

Chief Harkins balked at my request for help, until I asked if the Hawleyville police force had some sort of benefit program which was in need of contributions.

"Well now, we been thinking of starting one," said Harkins, who was quick on the uptake.

"Allow me to be the first contributor," I said. "How about a hundred dollars?"

"That will be adequate," said the chief. "I'll send Carl and Frank right out."

Carl and Frank corralled the motorcyclists, but by this time the club manager was complaining to me that the contestants were trampling his flower beds and littering the lawn with paper, soft drink bottles, and beer cans.

"Foshay Productions will reimburse you for any damage," I promised and went to see how the auditions were going.

The answer, obviously, was "fast."

Each aspirant was asked to read these lines from *Hamlet*:

Doubt thou the stars are fire;
Doubt that the sun doth move;
Doubt truth to be a liar;
But never doubt I love.

After each contestant read these lines the casting director said: "Thank you. We'll let you know." That was all, except for those who got cut off earlier by the director's impatience.

In the library the simultaneous audition was proceeding at the same pace while Amy watched, making notes and looking uncomfortable.

I couldn't stay there long because the manager of the club hunted me out once more.

"There's cars parked every which way on the road out there, and the regular traffic can't get through," he said. "We need more police."

I called Chief Harkins, donated another hundred dollars to the Policeman's Benevolent Association, or whatever he planned to call it, and got one more policeman.

By then it was time for Amy to go to the high school to be reunited with Miss Laskey for the benefit of *Focus* magazine, but when I went to get her she balked. How, she asked, could she leave the judging?

"If I don't see them all, how can I choose?" As I said, Amy's big fault was that she always made sense.

But not quite enough sense sometimes.

"So you're not seeing the tryouts in the other room either," I pointed out.

"Yes, but I'm only a judge in this room." Amy had another fault, stubbornness.

We were still arguing when the casting director came in from the next room, wiping his face with a handkerchief.

"I've had it," he said. "If I have to listen to one more 'Doubt thou the stars . . .,' I'll climb the wall. Let's call it quits and tell them to come back tomorrow."

Since Moline was willing and that solved my impasse with Amy, I agreed. As we left the club the driveway was so jammed with cars that we had to drive over the lawn and through a ditch to reach the road into town.

The reunion between Amy and her old teacher was an emotional one. After Miss Laskey wiped away the tears, Amy addressed the sophomore English composition class. She did very well, too, although I was a little bit disappointed that she didn't use the speech I had written for her.

From the school, we went to the Methodist Church for the luncheon Amy was giving for all the members of her high school class. We were a little late, and the guests were all there when Amy walked in. They stood up and clapped, and Nat Crowe gave her a wolf whistle. Amy replied with a big wink, and that set the stage for the proceedings, which were unabashedly sentimental. Several persons arose and

gave unsolicited testimonials to Amy that invariably started, "Do you remember the day when?" Somebody recalled that the yearbook had named Amy as the member of the class most likely to succeed, and Nat Crowe proposed that Amy be proclaimed the prettiest girl ever graduated from Hawleyville high school, "next to Mrs. Crowe of course." The resolution passed unanimously although Mrs. Crowe was not as quick to respond to the standing vote as some of the others.

When it was Amy's turn to speak she mentioned that a number of them had been members of the Senior High Literary Society.

"But the closest we ever got to literature," she said, "was meeting boys in the library."

When the laughter died down she asked, "Remember the stacks?" She rolled her eyes, and the old gang broke up again. Nat Crowe had a choking spell.

Then she read some prepared remarks, only they weren't the ones I had written. Corn? Sure it was, and the old high school class was captivated.

"Three cheers for Amy," shouted Nat Crowe when she finished, and he was so carried away he didn't notice that the Mrs. was pulling on his coat and telling him to sit down, for heaven's sake.

When the luncheon was over everybody crowded around to shake Amy's hand or kiss her, with Nat Crowe at the head of the pack. Mrs. Crowe was well toward the tail end of the well-wishers, and something told me that Nat was going to discover when he got home that he'd made a fool of himself. But when he was bussing Amy, he sure didn't care.

Amy couldn't tarry at the church because we had to be back at the club by three o'clock to get the word on her Pulitzer prize.

A group of us went into the library and locked the door after I'd noted with satisfaction that only a few of the aspir-

ing actors and actresses were still around, lounging on the lawn of the club as if it were a public park.

With me, as I placed a call to a friend at the New York *Dispatch*, were Amy, George Schauffer, Walter Driscoll, Irish, Norma Ackley, Janice Carlisle, Lars Johnston, and Moline.

"Hello, Bob," I said as my call went through. "Any word?"

"Not yet. You want to hold the line?"

I said I certainly did, and while we waited I lighted a cigarette and wiped the palm of my free hand on my trouser leg occasionally while wondering why it was perspiring and why I was nervous about something that was a sure thing. The others made small jokes that drew big laughs, the kind of wise cracks that come only from persons trying to show how calm they are.

Finally, my friend at the other end said, "Hang on, we're starting to get it."

I crushed out the cigarette, cupped my hand over the phone, and said to the others, "Pipe down; we'll have it any moment now."

Since there was no doubt about the outcome, I don't know why we were so jumpy. While we waited Lars bent a paper clip into the shape of a sea horse, George Schauffer tied a half dozen knots in the cord of a venetian blind, Amy asked for a cigarette although she already had one in her hand, Moline polished the toes of his shoes on the back of his trouser legs, Norma wiped her glasses, Janice tugged at her girdle, and Walter Driscoll kept reminding Irish he wanted a photograph of Amy at the exact moment she got the news.

"Oh, oh," said Bob on the far end of the line, "here it comes."

There was a pause, and I could hear the rustle of paper before he said, "Oh well, you can't win 'em all."

"Who won?" My mouth had gone dry.

"The novel award," Bob said, "went to somebody named Avery Hermann."

"Never heard of him," I protested.

"Sorry." Bob sounded as if he meant it; he was a nice guy.

"Thanks," I said, "thanks very much."

I hung up and repeated what I'd been told. The reaction was instantaneous and homogeneous from:

George Schaffer—"I'll have to kill those ads we had ready to go."

Walter Driscoll—"There goes the news peg for the whole damn article."

Norma Ackley—"All my life I've wanted a Pulitzer prize."

Janice Carlisle—"I just lost at least a thousand dollars in commissions."

Lars Johnston—"I knew you shouldn't have been so sure she'd win."

Frankie Moline—"Kill me; somebody kill me."

Me—"Now I'll have to rewrite the speeches for 'Amy Neal Day.'"

Irish—"You still want that picture?"

Amy Neal—Nothing.

When I thought to look for Amy, she was gone.

Chapter 16

I WENT up to Amy's suite, and my knocks on the door was hesitant because I expected to find her in tears.

Instead, she was serene and composed, seemingly much less shaken up than the rest of us.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Everybody thought it was in the bag."

"With one exception," she said. "Me. The judges must have known what they were doing."

"The hell they did." I was not so generous. "I came up here to offer a shoulder to cry on. You sure you don't want to borrow a handkerchief or something?"

"Heavens no." She laughed. "I don't cry that easily. What I came up here for was to change my clothes for the cocktail party."

"You sure you feel like going? I could say you have a headache."

"I'll be there," she promised.

And she was there, as gracious a hostess as I ever saw in

the receiving line as members of the country club trooped in. Phil Damen arrived early, and after the receiving line broke up he was quick to engage Amy in conversation that she obviously found amusing.

I didn't stay at the party long because Moline took me aside and said he had the word that Albert Foshay had arrived in Indianapolis and was on the way to Hawleyville by car. He asked me to join him at the Prairie Inn to await the arrival of the man. We were there when Foshay waddled in, glancing around and murmuring, "Charming, charming."

Without giving him a chance to become uncharmed by the musty odor in the lobby, we hustled him up to the new Albert Foshay suite which he inspected with a critical eye.

"H-m-m-m," he observed after making a circuit of the sitting room and bedroom, "Sears-Roebuck modern."

Moline closed his eyes for a moment, and I knew he was begging to be stricken dead.

Having made his appraisal of the decor, Foshay sampled the view.

"Nice trees," he conceded, taking in the vista. Then he began surveying the adjacent property.

"What's that house over there?" He pointed straight at Cindy's sin center.

"Over where?" Moline began gawking around as if he'd never looked out that particular window before.

"Right there."

"Oh *that* one." Moline was trying so hard to shrug it off that I was afraid he'd dislocate something. "That's just a house, er, I mean a home, a home. Yes, not a house, a home."

"Whose home?" Foshay had an inquisitive mind.

"I'm not sure really," Moline said, improvising desperately. "Some little old lady. I forget her name. But she's quite prominent here. As a matter of fact I remember one of the town officials saying she's made some important contribu-

tions to the civic welfare. Right now, I think, she's on vacation somewhere. That's what I heard."

"H-m-m-m," Foshay rumbled, still eying Cindy's establishment. "Looks like a whorehouse."

I thought Moline was going to die laughing, which obviously was his goal. "Ho, ho, ha, ha. In Hawleyville? Mr. Foshay, your sense of humor is delicious. Why we're in the heart of the Bible Belt, with a church for every three hundred people, or something like that. They're very moral here, very upright. Let me tell you a story I heard, and this is really a good one, really a good one."

As he continued, Moline worked himself in between Foshay and the window, blocking the view. "It goes like this. A traveling salesman came to Hawleyville, and during the evening he went down to the desk clerk here at the hotel and asked, 'Where's the night life around here?' And the desk clerk replied, 'There ain't any, mister, she's visiting in Indianapolis.'"

Foshay made a creaking sound that might have been a chuckle, but he said, "Still looks like a whorehouse."

Having lost that round, Moline sought to recoup with a description of the storming of the Hawleyville Country Club by aspirants for roles in *HOME OF THE HEART*, and Foshay, at last, was pleased.

"This picture is going to be a hit before we make a foot of film," Foshay said. "Nice work."

Beaming from this accolade, Moline seemed oblivious to the crowds lounging on the courthouse lawn and milling about in front of the Shanghai Lounge as we left the hotel for the country club. Neither he nor Foshay appeared to notice the half dozen motorcycles that roared past us as we turned onto Main Street, but I did, and I was sure they were from the mob of stardom hunters and that they were going to mean trouble before we were through with Hawleyville.

The dinner for members of the Hawleyville Boosters Club

and their wives, which was held in the dining room of the country club, went smoothly. Amy's speech was short, but excellent, and if I had any criticism at all it was that she didn't use the one I had written for her.

The dinner broke up around ten o'clock, and I intended to go to my room and rewrite the speeches for "Amy Neal Day," but Lars Johnston asked if he could please have the room to himself for an hour or so for some private business. Rather than take romance out of Lars' life even for one hour, I said I'd find some other place to work.

I took my portable typewriter and went to Amy's suite. She was delighted to see me. "I'm not sleepy, and I was afraid I'd have to sit here moping by myself. Lee, I'm not really as stoic about that Pulitzer business as I pretended."

"Has any of our crowd said they're sorry?" I asked.

"Of course." She smiled. "They're all sorry. George Schauffer because it ruined his advertising program, Norma Ackley because she's wanted to be the editor of the prize winner, Janice Carlisle because she's lost a negotiating weapon on any other book I might write, Walter Driscoll because his article will be less timely, and Frankie Moline because he lost something he could exploit and because Mr. Foshay says it's all his fault."

"Hasn't anyone said he's sorry, just for your sake?" I was disgusted.

"Just one." She dropped her bantering tone. "Just you. And I appreciate it."

She walked over to a wall cabinet. "And to prove it, I'm going to pour you as expensive a drink as you've ever had." She held up a key. "When I met Phil Damen this afternoon he gave me this. It's to his liquor cabinet, and I've been nosing around."

She took out a bottle that she held up for me to see. "Sixteen-year-old Scotch, which I've seen advertised at \$18.50 a fifth."

Pouring a generous drink into a highball glass, she handed it to me. "At that price I won't desecrate it with water or ice cubes."

While she was helping herself, Frankie Moline arrived with a summons from Albert Foshay who wanted Amy to play in his foursome in the golf tournament we had scheduled for the next morning. Moline and I were to be the others. Amy demurred, said she hadn't played in three years, said she had no clubs, no shoes, no time, but Moline had all the answers.

"How about the judging of the talent contest?" she said.

"Mr. Foshay will excuse you," Moline promised.

"But how can I make decisions if I see only some of the contestants?" There she went, making sense again.

"Look, Amy, look. When Mr. Foshay asks you to do something you don't make excuses or say you'll think it over, you just do it." In Frankie's world, disagreement with Albert Foshay amounted to treason.

"All right," said Amy, "if that's what he wants."

Moline left, and Amy poured us another drink while I set up my typewriter on a coffee table and began pecking away at the revision of the speeches to take out references to the Pulitzer Prize. And that reminded me.

"Those remarks you made today at the luncheon and dinner were excellent," I said, "but I've been wondering why you haven't used anything that I wrote for you."

Amy, sitting on a couch across the room, sipped her drink before she answered. "I should have mentioned that ahead of time, and I'm sorry about it. But I just couldn't get up and say words that weren't mine, while pretending that they were. It wasn't that what you wrote wasn't good; that was part of the trouble—it was too good. Letting all those people think I'm that clever would be a kind of dishonesty I can't commit."

"Taradiddle?" I grinned.

"Yes," she agreed, "taradiddle."

"You," I told her, "are the only person I know who is rational while being ridiculous. So I guess there's no point in rewriting your remarks for 'Amy Neal Day,' is there?"

"I suppose not." She finished her drink.

"Howard Cadman," I said, "is delighted to have a ghost writer. So will you excuse me please while I fix up his speech?"

Before she could answer there was another knock at the door and Walter Driscoll joined us.

"I need the details on 'Amy Neal Day,'" he said.

Once more, I repeated what I had told him earlier, that it was being sponsored by the Boosters Club, that there would be a short ceremony on the courthouse lawn with Howard Cadman presenting Amy with a gold key to the city, and that Amy would make appropriate remarks.

"Who's paying for it?" he asked.

"There's nothing much to pay for," I said. "Just the key and the speakers' stand in the courthouse park. Walter, could we go into the details later? I've some work I have to get out tonight." I pointed to the typewriter.

"How about the seven hundred and fifty dollar donation to the Boosters Club?" Only a boor and a louse would have brought that up in front of Amy, but only Walter Driscoll was both.

"Oh *that*." I wanted to get across the idea that it was of no importance. "It was just a donation to the Boosters for some do-good project." I couldn't disclaim it, and I couldn't look at Amy either.

"Who's paying it?" Walter wouldn't let go.

"Me."

"Personally?"

"Oh, it may turn up on my expense account to Foshay Productions sometime." I pointed to the typewriter again. "Really, Walter, I'm busy as hell." I gave him a pleading

look, begging for a reprieve, and, for reasons of his own, Walter decided to give it to me.

I saw him to the door, and as I closed it Amy was pouring herself another drink.

"Why?" she asked.

"Why what?" Some day, I promised myself, I would punch Walter square in the nose.

"Why the seven hundred and fifty dollars?" She seemed more distressed than angry.

"I guess I got carried away by Howard Cadman's enthusiasm for 'Amy Neal Day.' When I discovered someone who was so fond of my favorite author I felt the need to reciprocate."

"Lee, whose idea was 'Amy Neal Day?'" She was sitting on the couch again, sipping her drink.

"Oh, I don't know." I picked up my glass, saw that it was empty and put it down again. "It was one of those things. I got to talking to Cadman, and it just sort of blossomed forth."

"In other words, your idea?"

"It probably was," I conceded.

She put her drink on a table and came over to where I was, looking down at me for a moment before she said: "Did you have to bribe Howard Cadman with seven hundred and fifty dollars to get an 'Amy Neal Day' in Hawleyville?"

"No, I did not." She'd phrased the question so that I was able to speak the truth. "I didn't have to pay him money to get an 'Amy Neal Day.'"

True, I had bribed him, but not with money; it was the prospect of publicity that won him over.

Amy stared at me for a moment before she went back to the couch and sat down. I began trying to rework Howard Cadman's speech, but the words didn't appear. I stared at the paper, I frowned, I wiggled my fingers, I loosened my necktie, but nothing happened; the paper stayed blank. My

mind was across the room with Amy, and when I looked up she said, "I've never been drunk before."

"You're not drunk now."

"No," she said as she walked over to the liquor cabinet and picked up the bottle, "but I'm going to be."

"Why?"

"Just because I feel like it."

"What's bothering you Amy?" I was worried because with a hangover she might not be able to go through with the program the next day and because bringing her to Hawleyville had been my idea. "What's your problem?"

"Not problem." Amy corrected me. "Problems."

"Like what?"

"Like whether I'll be able to write another novel." In a gulp she came close to emptying her glass. "I don't much care whether I do not. But Norma Ackley cares, Janice Carlisle cares, Owen Boice cares, George Schaffer cares. They're disappointed in me."

"Don't worry about them," I advised. "They're big enough to take care of themselves."

"But that's not all," Amy said. "There's more."

"Like what?"

"Like who really wrote the book. Me or Norma Ackley? She did a lot of work on it; maybe there's more of Norma in it than there is of me."

"Hah." I had the answer. "Don't you believe that. All Norma Ackley contributed was some technical advice, based on experience. HOME OF THE HEART is a hit because of its freshness, its sincerity, the quality of the composition. All Norma Ackley did was to put the icing on the cake after you baked it. And don't let anyone tell you differently, especially Norma Ackley. If she could write a novel, she'd have done it long ago."

"You're very kind." She yawned. "Let's just have one more drink before I go to bed and sleep and sleep and sleep." She

poured the drinks that were three times as much as either of us needed, and then she curled up on the couch, with her head resting on the arm.

"There's another thing," she said.

"Such as?"

"Such as Frankie Moline and Lars Johnston and George Schauffer and you."

"Me? What's the matter with me?" I knew what was wrong with the rest of them.

Crossing the room, I sat on the floor beside her, and she reached out and patted me on the head.

"It's nothing personal," she said. "It's what you represent that's wrong."

"What do I represent?" Now there was a question I'd like to have answered.

"It's this." She spoke slowly, as if groping for the words. "It's all this unreality. It's the pretense and the window dressing, the myths and the fabrications. It's the delusion, like 'Amy Neal Day.' Why, most of the people in Hawleyville think the Boosters Club invited me here. But it wasn't the club at all; in a way it was me through my press agent—excuse me, public relations counselor—who created 'Amy Neal Day,' and here I am waltzing around town as if I owned the place. I gave a luncheon, but you arranged it and paid for it. I'm to be the guest of honor at a luncheon but again I suppose you're picking up the check. Howard Cadman is going to stand in the town square and say nice things about me, but the words won't be his; they'll be yours. It's as if I hired someone to get up in public and saw how wonderful I am. It's pure humbug."

"But there's no harm in it," I protested. "Who's being hurt?"

"Nobody but me, I guess." Her voice was drowsy. "Somewhere in all this make-believe I've lost touch with myself."

"Taradiddle, huh?" I was trying to understand.

"Um-hmm." She raised up enough to finish off what was left in her glass.

"We've been through this before," I reminded her. "And again let me say it takes a certain amount of make-believe and pretense to keep our society moving. People are sophisticated; they're adjusted to life's basic sham, hokum, hanky-panky, delusion, or whatever you call it, even taradiddle. They expect it, and since that's the way it is, why fight it?"

"I don't know," she said. "But I can't help it. And right now I don't care."

She started to sit up, then thought better of it. "It's funny; I feel great but I'm still sober. A little sleepy maybe, but sober. All those drinks and I still feel sober. I feel..." Her eyelids closed, and she began breathing heavily.

Amy had passed out.

I stayed where I was, looking at her and thinking and sipping my drink, and I must have dozed off before the ringing of the telephone startled me so that I dropped my glass.

To answer I had to cross the room, and it was slow going because my foot was asleep.

"Whups, who's this?" Oh brother, it was Arthur Phillips.

I said it was me, an admission I would have avoided if I'd been fully awake.

"I heard about that Pulitzer thing," he said. "I'd have called earlier, but we had a bowling tournament. How's Amy taking it? I mean about not getting the prize."

"All right," I said. "She's pretty strong, you know."

"I'd like to talk to her."

"Well." I looked at Amy slumbering on the couch, and I said, "She, ah, can't come to the phone right now."

"Why not?" He was going to be difficult, but I couldn't tell him his wife was dead drunk.

"She's, ah, she's taking a bath."

"At one o'clock in the morning?" He didn't seem to believe me.

"She's been busy," I explained. "I guess it's the first chance she's had."

"If she's taking a bath, what are you doing there?" He had logic on his side.

"I'm not there," I pointed out. "I'm here. She's in the bathroom, and I'm in the sitting room. This is a suite."

"Oh." He was still puzzled. "It's kind of funny she'd be taking a bath with you around."

"Not at all," I assured him. "I was helping her write her speech for tomorrow, and she said she was tired and going to bed. I was just finishing the typing when you called."

"Oh." He seemed to believe me. "Well, you tell her tomorrow that I called, will you?"

I said I certainly would.

Having disposed of Arthur Phillips, I faced the problem of what to do about his wife. I couldn't leave her where she was. She would feel bad enough in the morning without also having a crick in her neck from spending the night on the couch. I tried to awaken her by calling her name and shaking her, but she was out all the way. That left me no choice but to carry her into the next room where I stretched her out on the bed. I pulled off her shoes, put a blanket over her, opened the window so she'd get the fresh air she would need in the morning, and turned out the light.

As I left, I switched off the light in the sitting room and listened for the catch on the hall door to snap shut behind me. I wanted to make certain that Amy would be undisturbed.

That's why I locked myself out.

Chapter 17

ON TUESDAY I woke up the same way I had the day before, only earlier. Again the phone was ringing, and the club manager was calling for help.

"They're all over outside," he complained. "And they're coming down the road in droves."

Without asking, I knew what he was talking about.

"I'll be right down," I said, glancing at the clock. It was ten minutes after six.

Ordinarily, the view from the second floor of the Hawleyville Country Club is one of pastoral serenity, with green lawns, rolling hills, plowed fields, dewy meadows, and bushy green trees reaching to the horizon, but all I noticed this morning was humanity. Applicants for movie stardom were everywhere.

They were on the lawns, the tennis courts, the driveways, the golf course, the parking lot, and the road. Some were huddled together, sleeping on newspapers they had spread

out on the ground. Others were asleep in cars. Somebody had pitched a pup tent beside the 18th green. One fellow, who must have expected to find marauding beasts in the wilds of Indiana, had lashed himself to a tree limb where he was snoozing safe from harm.

A group wearing Texas-style hats had lighted a fire in the bottom of the empty swimming pool and started cooking breakfast. Several youths were playing touch football, and a girl in bluejeans was walking around the tennis court, on her hands.

I called Chief Harkins at his home and said we needed emergency police protection, and he said he'd do what he could, and I said I'd send another hundred dollars for the Policemen's Benevolent Fund, and he said the contributions had been coming in pretty slow and could I make it two hundred, and I said yes, but hurry.

"Man," said Lars, looking out the window, "you better call the governor and have him send down the national guard."

At the time, I thought that was a silly idea.

With Moline and his Hollywood assistant, Manny Quinlan, and a couple of others we started the numbers draw going again, and with the help of the Hawleyville police force we got some semblance of order before we went into breakfast.

Amy came down while we were having our orange juice, and Lars moved over so she could sit between us. She was pale, and she took her seat slowly and carefully, so as not to shake anything loose.

"How are you?" I asked.

"Terrible," she said. "Was I awful?"

"No," I assured her. "You passed out like a lady."

She rubbed her forehead. "Somebody in there hates me," she complained. "How'd I get to bed?"

While I was telling her Moline came in and sat across from us.

"How do you like that mob out there?" he asked, looking

pleased with himself. "In the entire history of the industry there's never been anything like this. It's the greatest, the greatest."

"Is anyone getting those kids something to eat?" Amy asked.

"Not that I know of," said Moline, motioning to the waiter. "That's their problem."

"But you invited them here," Amy persisted.

"Not for breakfast I didn't," Moline said, reaching for the butter.

"Why don't you send out some coffee and rolls for them?" Amy's voice was weak, but her will was solid iron.

"Wait a minute." Moline raised his arms in a gesture of helplessness. "I'm not the Salvation Army."

Amy stood up; it obviously was an effort, but she made it. "If you don't get some food to those kids right away," she threatened, "I won't play golf with Mr. Foshay."

"Oh, god." Moline jumped up, threw his napkin on the table, and strode off in the direction of the manager's office.

Amy sat down. "What's he doing?" she asked.

"I expect he's rustling up breakfast for your buddies outside," I told her. "You got him where it hurts. Mention Albert Foshay, and Frankie is all Achilles heel."

Walter Driscoll came in and sat next to Amy. "Who you playing golf with this morning?" he asked.

"Fine," he said, after she had told him what he already knew. "I think Irish and I will trail around to get some shots of you with Foshay."

"That's wonderful," I said, before Amy could object.

We had finished eating by the time Moline came back, with Foshay, who said he wanted some coffee before he started out. Amy announced she had to run an errand and nudged me to come along.

"Those people out front are going to be eating before I go to the golf course," she said as we reached the lobby. "Will

you please check up on that while I go upstairs and screw my head on tighter? Right now it feels as if it might fall off, and there's somebody in there beating on my skull with a hammer."

Outside I found the mob swarming around two coffee urns and a table where a waiter was handing out rolls. The Hawleyville police force was maintaining a minimum of order.

By the time Amy and I returned to the breakfast table, Moline had swallowed two cups of coffee, a pep-up pill, an allergy pill, and a stomach tablet to speed the digestion of the pills. He was in a more cheerful mood that became absolutely jovial as we headed for the golf course and Foshay congratulated him on thinking to provide food for the contestants. He took his bow without a glance at Amy.

At the first tee Foshay suggested a "nominal bet," just to make it fun. His idea of fun was \$10 a hole, and he gallantly ruled that Amy should use the ladies tee and be given two strokes a hole. She tried to decline the handicap, but he refused to listen.

"I don't think any of us wants to take advantage of you, my dear," he said. And that was the last time he ever addressed her as "my-dear."

Within minutes he became aware of the high cost of chivalry. His old owl eyes bulged as he watched Amy address the ball like an old friend, waggle her club and her fanny as if they were one, and blast a screaming drive down the middle of the fairway.

"Incredible," he muttered, in the first of a long line of mutters.

Amy's short game was not up to her driving, not quite. But she had Foshay groaning when she laid an approach shot within ten feet of the pin from one hundred yards out. Moline was playing the kind of game Foshay expected of him, lousy. And I can play a pretty good customer's game myself.

As for Amy, all she lost on the first several holes was her hangover.

"In forty years," Moline told me as we trudged down the fairway, "Foshay hasn't lost a game to anyone in the movie industry, and he hasn't played anyone else. Except, of course, when Ike was President."

After Amy won the second hole with a twenty-foot putt, I sidled up to her and suggested, sotto voiced, that it would be the better part of valor to let Foshay win once in a while.

"Unuh." She had that stubborn look again. "Ten dollars means more to me than it does to him. Anyway, it wouldn't be honest."

Irish, the *Focus* photographer, was darting all over the landscape, snapping his shutter, and Driscoll was bobbing about, eavesdropping and taking notes. In no time at all they got on Foshay's nerves, which grew tauter on the third green where Amy holed out in four.

"Hey, you two," Foshay barked. "Get lost!"

"Now look, Mr. Foshay, we were invited here to take pictures, and that's what we're going to do." Walter's skin was as thick as his head.

Moline quickly busied himself with inspecting the roll of the green, as if he had gone stone deaf, and I had to move in. The upshot was a negotiated truce. Irish would continue taking pictures, but he wouldn't try for any more head shots of Foshay. It was to be expected, I suppose, that a man who had spent his life making close-ups of other people for public exhibition around the world would object when the camera was trained on himself. Life is like that.

In a frantic whisper, Moline offered to pay Amy's losses, if she'd only take it easy. And after she won the hole with a birdie he promised to double anything she lost.

Amy smiled and said, "That's sweet of you dear, but I couldn't."

By this time Foshay was waddling along in sulky silence,

the caddies were laughing among themselves, Irish was delighted with the pictures, and if the man with the hammer was still inhabiting Amy's head, he'd lost his steam.

On the fifth hole Foshay tried to improve his lie by nudging the ball with his foot, but he couldn't kick it all the way into the cup, and Amy won the hole by two strokes.

That, I would say, was the turning point toward disaster. It was then when Foshay, who was out fifty dollars, changed his tactics, quit trying to match her skill, and took dead aim on her id.

He quit glowering and started smiling; he quit sulking and started talking.

"Young lady," he said, "your variety of accomplishments is amazing." His tone was conciliatory, his manner benevolent, and there was no trace of the gibberish that so often obscured his meanings. "You play golf the way you write."

Amy accepted this as a compliment, and she was still glowing when he added, "Very well for one who doesn't get much practice."

He waddled away, leaving Amy to think that over while she dubbed a couple of shots. For the first time, Foshay won a hole, but only after Moline managed to miss a putt from eighteen inches away.

"Your novel is going to make a great movie," Foshay told Amy as we plodded toward the next tee.

"Thank you." Amy's eyes turned bright again.

"Three of the best writers in the business are working on the script," he said. "They really know how to take the rough spots out of a first novel."

Amy got too much waggle into her drive, and the ball landed in a sand trap.

"Too bad," clucked Foshay, looking pleased.

On the fairway I managed to get Moline aside. "Is he really that cruel?" I asked. "Doesn't he know how much that hurts anyone as sensitive as Amy?"

"Aaah." Moline shrugged. "He knows, but he plays to win, and if giving her the needle will wreck her game, then she gets it."

As we continued, Foshay jabbed again and again at Amy's pride, deflating her ego and inflating her score.

Once when I managed to be alone with Amy I said, "He's just trying to throw you off your game; don't let him bother you."

"Bother me!" She was indignant. "Who cares about that old toad?"

She answered her question by hooking her ball into the rough.

On the 11th hole I managed to stumble over Foshay's ball, booting it from the lip of the green into a sandtrap, without being detected, but he won the hole anyway while telling her what was wrong with the book's opening. He took the next hole while telling her what was the matter with the ending.

By the 16th hole Foshay had recouped his losses. Although Amy reached the 17th green in two, Foshay seemed imperturbable and increasingly garrulous as he described his plans for filming *HOME OF THE HEART*.

His observations bordered on babble as he addressed his ball after he reached the green, and he might have been talking to himself when he said:

"Of course, even if the writers strike out, Foshay has bought the insurance. He got that when he signed a couple of top stars like Lisa Dane and Gregg Landon for the leads."

He looked up, as if surprised to hear himself, and said, "That's off the record of course."

My eye was on Amy, and I saw her stiffen in a single muscular spasm with her lips moving wordlessly until, with an effort, she called, "Wait."

Foshay, who was lining up his putt, straightened up in feigned surprise. "Yes?" He was all innocence.

"You mean," Amy shouted, "all that is for nothing?"

With her putter she pointed toward the clubhouse where the auditions were going on.

"Not for nothing," Foshay said. "Some might get roles in the picture."

"Minor roles?" Amy's voice broke. "But they think they're trying out for the leads."

"Young woman, Foshay has been making pictures for forty years." He was patient with her. "Surely you don't think he would risk millions of dollars on a couple of untested kids with no box office appeal." Blinking those owl eyes, he shook his head slowly, as if the existence of such naiveté were beyond belief.

"But all those kids," Amy cried. "Some of them came thousands of miles to get here. They spent every cent they had to make the trip. Maybe they quit their jobs, or ran away from home. Some of them had no place to sleep last night, except on the ground. How can you cheat them this way? How can you play games with their dreams?"

"And how can you be such a big fat son-of-a-bitch?"

Foshay blinked so hard his eyelashes quivered.

For a moment nobody spoke, nobody moved; then for Amy the countdown was over and she was off the launching pad. Swinging her putter, she lunged at Foshay.

Now ordinarily I'm not so much in an emergency, but this time I jumped quickly enough to get between them. With one hand I grabbed the golf club a split second before it would have opened up Foshay's skull, and with the other hand I led her away. She was shaking, sputtering, and fuming in a rage that had driven her to the brink of hysteria. Without exchanging a word, we marched straight to the clubhouse, my fist around her arm as if she were under arrest. I put her in her suite and went down to the bar. At times like these a man can only drink and think.

I was doing both when Moline came in.

"A double vodka," he told the bartender without speaking to me. "No mix, no rocks, just vodka."

"Foshay's mumbling about maybe canceling the picture." His eyes were on the ceiling, as if he were addressing some higher being, even higher than Foshay. In a gulp, he emptied the glass.

"I'm dead," he mourned. "You're dead. We're all dead."

He wandered away, presumably in the direction of the Styx.

I was still there, no longer drinking but still thinking, when Irish came in.

"Straight orange juice," he said to the bartender, dropping his photographer's bag on the seat between us.

"I suppose you got some great pictures out there just now," I said.

"I'll say." He patted the bag. "Right there, I got it all, including a great shot of Amy trying to bash that slob on head with a putter. For that I'll get a bonus, sure as hell."

"Yeah," I nodded, "sure as hell."

For the moment I'd lost interest in drinking, but I was thinking, thinking, thinking. "Excuse me," I said, "I'm going to get some cigarettes."

From the lobby phone booth I called Howard Cadman.

"Just to make sure the *Focus* magazine photographer is there when you hand the gold key to Amy tomorrow," I told him, "I would appreciate it if you would call him here at the club and give him a special invitation, right now. And I think it will mean more to him if you don't mention that I suggested it."

After telling him how Irish could be reached I went back to the bar and waited while Mr. McCoy was paged over the amplifier.

"Take care of my bag, will you?" Irish asked, as he left to take the call.

I promised I would, and I did.

As soon as he was out of sight I dug into the bag and exposed all the film I could find.

It was easy because I was alone in the room except for the bartender who couldn't see what I was doing. I snapped the bag shut, signed the tab, and left in a hurry. Of course Irish would suspect me, but he wouldn't be able to prove anything. As for Driscoll, he might jump to the conclusion Irish had been drunk again, and anyway neither would know what had happened until they were back in New York developing the film.

It was a scurvy trick, and sometimes I still try to feel ashamed of myself.

Chapter 18

WHEN I rapped at the door of Amy's suite it was time to leave for the luncheon of the Ladies Literary Society.

But I was wondering if the ladies would have to carry on without their guest of honor who, when last seen, had been coming apart at the seams. Taking into account past performance, percentages, bloodlines, and the rate of fallout from a golf course, I figured these were the odds on Amy:

- having a tantrum, 3 to 1.
- getting loaded, 3 to 2.
- sulking, 2 to 1.
- being ready for the luncheon, 1 to 20.

Which proved that, as a handicapper, I was out of the money.

When Amy opened the door she was dressed, ready to go out, and she looked as composed and sound as ever, except for traces of morning-after pallor.

"Oh, hello." Her eyes brightened, but her voice was timid. "Are you still speaking to me?"

"Sure. Isn't everybody?"

"Not anybody who saw what happened this morning," she said. "I was a disgrace."

She shut the door, and we sat on the couch.

"Poor Mr. Foshay." She was subdued and contrite. "Thanks for keeping me from murdering him."

"Oh, I wasn't trying to save his life," I protested. "But the way you were playing you couldn't afford to waste a stroke."

I laughed alone.

Amy inspected her fingernails and frowned. "Did the photographer get a picture when I went berserk?"

"He says, yes, but don't let it worry you."

"I'm not worried." She clasped her hands. "I'm frantic. When that picture appears in *Focus* magazine, oh, god. Think how it'll look. There I'll be, crazy mad, swinging at a little old man, trying to beat his brains out with a golf club. They'll have me committed."

"Forget it." I offered her a cigarette which she refused. "*Focus* magazine won't print that picture, believe me."

She was not convinced. "Did Walter Driscoll or the photographer tell you that?"

"No," I admitted, "they didn't. And right now they may think they're going to use the picture. But when they get back to New York they'll change their minds."

"Why?"

"Because I know something they don't." I took a long time lighting my cigarette. "And please don't speak to either of them about it or tell them what I've said. Just believe me."

"All right," she said, "I do."

And the funny part was that I knew she did.

She tried to smile, an appealing effort that made her look so defenseless, so fragile that I then understood why I was

willing to chance wrecking the Hawleyville project and jeopardizing my future rather than see that photograph in *Focus* magazine.

"Come on." I jumped up. "We've got to get going. The Hawleyville literati are waiting."

"You go ahead," he said. "I'll fix my face and meet you in the lobby in two minutes."

As I waited downstairs, standing between the lines of aspirants for a film career, I wondered if I had been wrong in saving Foshay from a cracked skull. All those contestants looked so eager.

Lars Johnston found me there. "I've been looking for you," he said. "The governor sends his regrets; he can't make it to the dinner tonight. What'll we do?"

"Just tell the club manager to scratch one," I said. "That saves us fifteen dollars."

"What the hell?" asked Lars. "How come you're not sore?"

"I am sore," I said, "but I'd expected he would poop out. What I offered him was a chance to get his picture taken with a Pulitzer prize winner. Now I can't deliver, so he can't come. It figures."

As Amy joined us she glanced at the waiting contestants.

"Isn't it awful," she whispered. "I could cry."

In the parking lot we met Frankie Moline, who was returning from town.

"I'm sorry," Amy told him. "I want to apologize to Mr. Foshay. Where can I find him?"

"New York." Moline's voice was sharply metallic. "He's gone home, mad."

"Oh." Amy wilted. "Before he left, did he say anything, about what happened on the golf course, I mean."

"He did, he did." Moline was snappish. "He gave me a message for you."

"Oh." Amy ran the fingers of both hands to the edge of

her scalp and slowly massaged her forehead, grimacing as she asked, "What was it?"

"Just this." Moline shook a finger at her. "He said to tell you that since you didn't hole out, you owe him ten dollars."

Moline stalked away, his lips moving wordlessly, and I knew he was begging to be stricken dead.

Driscoll and Irish were in the church basement waiting for us, and so were two hundred members of the Ladies Literary Club and their guests. Somebody said it was the biggest turnout for a meeting since they had that review of *Peyton Place*.

From my seat in the back of the room, I decided I had been wrong in thinking of Mrs. Weston, the club president, as a female Abraham Lincoln. Actually, she looked more like Teddy Roosevelt, except that she had bigger teeth.

Of course being up there next to Amy, Mrs. Weston and all the other women at the speakers table were at a disadvantage. By comparison with their guest, they all looked like dues-paying members of the Polly Adler Alumni Association.

Amy was marvelous, speaking simply, forcefully, and eloquently without notes or recourse to the remarks I had laboriously prepared for her. No one could have guessed that this gracious lady had risen that morning from the depths of a hangover and only a couple of hours earlier had tried to brain an old man with a golf club. And if they'd been told that, they couldn't have believed it. I hardly did myself.

When it was all over she got a whale of an ovation, and she would have been there all day, surrounded by well wishers, if I hadn't pushed through the crowd and said, "They're waiting for you."

"Who's waiting?" Amy asked when I got her away from the crowd.

"Just Driscoll and the photographer," I said. "They're out front."

"Then let's see if there's a back way out," she said. "There's something I want to do without them trailing along."

We found the back door and gave the *Focus* pair the slip. "Where to?" I asked.

"To Aunt Charlotte's," she said. "I can't leave without seeing her, and I want to find out about this libel suit."

When we reached the house I parked the car and asked, "You want to go it alone?"

"Oh no, no." She was nervous. "You come with me please."

On the porch I rang the bell and stepped back out of the line of fire. From Amy's description of life with Aunt Charlotte, I expected another round of the Thirty Years War, at least, instead of what really happened which was this:

Aunt Charlotte—"Amy!"

Amy—"Aunt Charlottel!"

A.C.—"It's you!"

Amy—"It's me."

A.C.—"Dear Amy."

Amy—"Dear Aunt Charlotte."

(They embraced.)

A.C.—"How are you?"

Amy—"Fine. How are you?"

A.C.—"Fine. How's everything?"

Amy—"Fine. How's . . ."

They'd probably still be at it if I hadn't broken in and said, "Hello, Miss Neal."

That got us off dead center and brought an invitation to come into the living room, where I sat down and witnessed one of the wackiest reunions of old enemies in the history of animosity. Amy said it was a joy to be home again. Aunt Charlotte said Amy was like a breath of fresh air. In turn, they were glad, happy, overjoyed, pleased, delighted, charmed, and cheered. I was puzzled, baffled, and stupefied.

The moment she began running low on adjectives and small talk Aunt Charlotte brought out the chocolate cake.

"I remember how you used to insist on having nothing but chocolate cake for your birthdays," Aunt Charlotte recalled, and that started them both off on recollections which, contrary to all I had heard, made the old days sound like sunny ones, crammed with fun.

But the moment one of them got around to mentioning *HOME OF THE HEART* I could feel the chill. The temperature continued to decline as Amy asked how in the world Aunt Charlotte could have reached the conclusion that the book had libeled her.

Aunt Charlotte's explanation, which followed, was surely one of the world's great masterpieces of incoherence.

She deviated, digressed, and meandered through the backwashes of her memories. She blabbered, she prattled, and she gabbled, straying from the subject into the labyrinth of local gossip, family relationships, proverbs, malapropisms, recollections of younger days, and a diagnosis of second cousin Norma's skin troubles. Like a hopelessly lost traveler, now and then she would recross the main line of thought, and during one of these excursions she happened to mention that she was suing because, as anyone could see, Amy had cast her in the book as a character named Rachel Enders.

"You? Rachel Enders?" Amy choked on a bite of cake, and Aunt Charlotte had to run to the kitchen to get a glass of water.

"Are you serious?" Sipping the water, Amy gradually regained the use of her voice. "You really think you're Rachel Enders?" Trying hard not to laugh, first she snickered, then tittered, then broke up completely, convulsed with glee bordering on hysteria. And, as I recalled the book, I could see why.

In *HOME OF THE HEART* Rachel Enders was a middle-aged seductress with a billowing waistline and sagging morals.

Rachel was forever laying out man traps and seldom catching anyone because she had the urge without the courage. She was a hunter who feared her prey.

Aunt Charlotte's identification with Rachel may have been meat for the psychoanalyst, but for Amy it was a preposterous misconception that left her gasping for breath in a rising tide of hilarity. Crossing the room, she collapsed on the couch beside Aunt Charlotte and threw her arms around her.

"Oh, no," she cried. "You're not Rachel Enders."

"I'm not?" Aunt Charlotte seemed surprised, pleased, amused, and a little disappointed.

"No, no." Weak from laughter, Amy rested her head on Aunt Charlotte's shoulder. "You could never be her."

"No, of course not," said Aunt Charlotte, who began laughing too.

When they were able to talk again Amy said she was so happy to find out it was all a mistake, and Aunt Charlotte said she was, too.

After a while Amy said it was time to go, and Aunt Charlotte asked her if she first would autograph her copy of *HOME OF THE HEART*.

While writing on the fly leaf Amy remarked that it would be a tremendous relief to have the libel suit canceled.

"Oh I couldn't do that," said Aunt Charlotte.

"Couldn't do what?" asked Amy, who was preoccupied with what she was writing.

"Couldn't drop the libel suit."

"What?" Amy put down the pen and turned to face her aunt. "Why can't you drop it?"

"I need the money." To Aunt Charlotte it was that simple.

"That's no reason." Watching Amy clench her fists, I knew the lid was about to blow.

"Come on, Amy," I urged. "We must be going."

Ignoring me, she took a step toward her aunt. "You can't sue me, if you're not Rachel Enders. And you're not!"

"But some people think I am," insisted Aunt Charlotte, "and that's enough. Cousin Norma's husband says so, and he's a lawyer. You remember him, Lou Barker, the one with the thick glasses."

"Name somebody who thinks you're Rachel Enders," snapped Amy.

"Cousin Norma."

"Cousin Norma is a nut."

"But we all need the money," Aunt Charlotte pleaded. "Cousin Norma already has written to hotels in Bermuda for rates. That's where she's going after the settlement. Why, if I dropped the suit she'd probably never speak to me again. And Lou, he needs the money. He's got all kinds of debts. And look at me. I haven't had a new winter coat in five years."

"You won't get a dime," said Amy, her face aglow with anger.

"Amy," Aunt Charlotte protested. "You owe it to me. I treated you like a daughter."

"Like hell you did." Amy was shouting now. "All you ever did was resent me."

"Come on," I said, taking Amy's arm. "We've got to be going."

She let me lead her toward the door, but Aunt Charlotte wasn't through.

"I'm just a poor woman." She began sniffing.

"Hah," snorted Amy. "You're just a money-mad old bitch."

In the car Amy let her head fall back on the seat and closed her eyes. "Damn her," she said, softly, as if talking to herself. "She's living in my house without paying rent. She's got plenty of money; she rents out rooms, and she's got an annuity, from an aunt who died years ago. Yet she wants everything I've got, and more. She always was like that, nagging me, wearing me down, trying to take away anything I might have. And I thought I was rid of her years ago."

I was driving toward the club, but Amy asked me to turn around.

"Please take me to the cemetery," she said, "I want to see my father's grave."

Outside the cemetery, which was called Mt. Hope, I parked on the road and started to get out of the car to go with her. But she stopped me.

"If you don't mind," she said, "I'd rather be alone."

As I watched her walk slowly between the graves she seemed more alone than anyone I ever had seen. She stopped before one of the markers, standing with head bowed while a slight breeze rustling the leaves made the only sound, except for the occasional tweet of a bird. Although she stayed only a few minutes, she seemed to have made peace with herself by the time she returned to the car.

"The night he was buried," she told me, "I spent the night there." She pointed at the grave. "I ran away."

"Imagine a sixteen-year-old girl doing a thing like that! That's what Aunt Charlotte said at the time. The trouble was I couldn't cry, not at first. Aunt Charlotte insisted on having my father 'laid out' in the sun room, so his friends could come and pay their respects. It's a hideous custom, and I couldn't bring myself to go in there where he was, and I didn't cry. I was too shaken up for tears, but Aunt Charlotte wouldn't understand."

"'Why don't you cry?' she would ask. 'Have you no feeling? Heavens, what must people think when they see you sitting there all dry-eyed. It's disgraceful. And you must go in there and see him. What will people say? Now you get in there, and, for heaven's sake, cry!'"

"But I wouldn't go in there, and I wouldn't cry, not until after he was buried and I could come out here and be alone. After that Aunt Charlotte wouldn't let me out of the house for a week."

On the way back to the country club Amy said her father's

death had led to her final break with Aunt Charlotte and that by the time she left for college they were barely speaking.

"I had a little money then from Father's estate," she said, "and I got jobs in the summer, and I never went back to that house again until now. And I wish I hadn't gone today."

At the country club we learned that the auditions had ended. All of the contestants had been given a hearing, however brief, and had been sent on their way after being told they would be called if wanted. It was a relief to be rid of them, but at five o'clock Amy had another ordeal, the cocktail party for the winners of the regional talent contests. There were only ten, and before I let Amy loose among them I made her promise she would not reveal that the stars of the picture already had been signed. She kept her promise, and, being Amy, she gave them a warm and friendly welcome, chatting with each one individually. She was still at it when Lars Johnston motioned from the door that he wanted to see me. In the corridor he showed me the editorial page of the Hawleyville *Argus*. Ed Keating was at it again.

The entire editorial column was devoted to castigating Amy and to blasting her book, the Albert Foshay Productions talent search, and "Amy Neal Day." Most disturbing of all was a line hinting that the talent contest was all window dressing and that the leads already had been assigned to a pair of big name stars.

Otherwise, Keating's comments were much the same as those he had made earlier, only more vitriolic. This time he had slugged Amy with everything he had except a flat bed press. He had stopped just short of suggesting that the platform built for the speakers at "Amy Neal Day" might better be used for a public lynching.

And he ended, in bold face type, with a final injunction: "AMY GO HOME."

Chapter 19

FOR the next few minutes Lars and I devoted ourselves to sabotage, throwing out all the copies of the Hawleyville *Argus* we could find around the club. After Foshay and Aunt Charlotte, I didn't want Amy to cope with Ed Keating too, and if he'd known her he would have thanked us. Anyway, she'd done enough coping for one day. I had just dropped the last discernible copy behind a radiator in the corridor when Amy came out of the lounge, looking for me.

"I wanted to ask about tonight," she said. "What do I call the governor? Your excellency?"

"No problem there," I said. "He's ill and can't come."

"Nothing serious, I hope." She seemed to accept my explanation, which was a relief. I'd even had visions of her running down to the state capitol to tell him off in person. The governor and Ed Keating both were in luck that night.

"This means you'll have to talk a little longer than

planned," I said. "Maybe another fifteen or twenty minutes."

"Twenty minutes!" Amy looked dismayed. "What will I say?"

"Come on," I said, "let's go upstairs and think about it."

"Whew," said Amy as we walked into the sitting room. "It's hot in here, even with those doors open." She pointed to French doors that opened onto a small balcony. "I'll open a window in the bedroom."

With the cross ventilation it was more comfortable, and I sat in a chair with my back to the open doors and with Amy on the couch facing me. My idea was that she could best replace the governor by giving all due credit to the state of Indiana's literary heritage for her success as a novelist, and we were discussing the best way to do this when, suddenly, Amy's words lost their sound, although her lips kept working, and her eyes focused with astonishment on the voice that, over my shoulder, warned, "Don't scream."

When I started to turn, the voice added, "That goes for you, too, mister." He didn't have to worry; my throat felt as if it had been sealed with hot wax.

With my head turned only part way, I couldn't see much but the gun, and that was enough to discourage me from seeking the whole picture.

"Up with your hands, mister," he commanded, and I obeyed, although the hands that I could see seemed to have no connection with the rest of me, either through muscles or nerves.

"Go sit on the couch beside her," the intruder said.

I was slow to move, maybe because I wasn't sure of my legs, but when he prodded me between the shoulder blades I could feel the gun barrel and, worse, imagine the bullet coursing through my chest cavity, squishing out between my ribs, and leaving a messy, red trail as it slid down the front of my shirt.

"Hurry up," he said.

I moved, and when I sat beside Amy my hands were still raised, and, being one who knows when to follow the rules of the game, I kept them there.

From the couch I got my first full view of the gunman, which neither lifted my spirits nor inspired me with courage. He was a hulk of a youth, who looked as if he might have flunked out of Cosa Nostra. His plaid sport jacket was stretched taut across his shoulder muscles, and his arms were too long for the sleeves. Beneath the jacket he wore a dark blue sport shirt, open at the neck. His slacks were new, but his white sneakers were soiled and worn. He had dark, curly hair that hung in ringlets over his forehead almost to his deep, black eyes. His skin was swarthy and his face too round, although he probably considered it handsome. The eyes were dilated, and I guessed he was a junkie.

"What do . . ." The words that had been stuck in my throat broke out, surprising me, and the gunman.

"Stuff it," he broke in. "I'm gonna do the talking." His voice was strange, deep, but soft like a woman's.

"You." He pointed the pistol at Amy. "You Amy Neal?"

"Yes I am." Her voice was firm.

"Who's he?" He nodded at me. "Your husband?"

"No," said Amy.

"Oh, ho," he leered.

Perhaps I should have spoken up in defense of Amy's honor, but he had the gun, and I have had a lifelong policy that calls for the conservative approach to emergencies. I'm chicken. That's why I sat there with my hands over my head, taking orders from a young punk who was hardly more than twice my size.

"I'll tell you what I want," he said in those dulcet tones that seemed to be wafted on a whiff of sewer gas. "I want to be Hack Winston in the movie. And you're gonna give me the part." He wagged the gun at Amy.

"But she just wrote the book," I protested. "She's not making the movie."

"Shut up," he said. "I saw her when she was a judge at the tryout. That nerd who was running it wouldn't let me finish my lines."

Amy eyed him without evident dismay. "All right," she said, "I'll give you the part."

For a moment he seemed about to accept the promise, but then doubt ringed his buggy eyes.

"But pretty boy here," he remembered, "said you weren't the one who's making the movie."

"He doesn't know what he's talking about." Amy was positive about it, and I shook my head in agreement.

"Yeah?" The gunman was uncertain, and now he was breathing heavily, as if he'd been running a long way. He held the pistol so he could sight along the barrel at Amy, but he was blinking so fast he had to give it up. I didn't need any medical advice to diagnose his ailment—he was a genuine psycho, first class.

"Just leave me your name and address, and I'll call the studio and tell them to give you Hack Winston's part." Amy's voice was smooth and soothing. "Actually, you've been my choice all along."

"Yeah?" She had him off balance, but he didn't lower the gun. "If I was so good, how come that nut who was running things didn't let me finish my lines?"

Amy had the answer. "He didn't have to hear any more. He told me you definitely were the one for the part."

For one so dedicated to truth and honesty, Amy could make a fib sound like the gospel, and, as scared as I was, I still could admire her for it. There always comes a time when the rules don't hold, and Amy, bless her deceitful heart, was a realist.

"All right," the kid said, "where's the contract. I'll sign."

Irrelevantly, I found myself wondering if he were old enough to enter a contract; I was that nervous.

"Oh, we can't sign here," Amy said patiently. "We'll do that in New York after the details are worked out. You know, salary, the matter of billing, all that sort of thing. And you'll need an agent and a lawyer to represent you."

"I don't want no agent," the kid mumbled. "And I hate lawyers. They're as bad as psychiatrists." He was so agitated he was panting. "And how do I know you won't change your mind?"

"You'll have to take her word for it." I was surprised to hear that voice although it definitely was mine.

"Pretty boy," said the intruder, turning the gun on me, "you talk too much."

At last he'd said something that had the ring of truth.

"You go over there and stand against the wall," he said, gesturing with the gun. "And shut up."

As I walked over to the wall I was trembling, probably as much from embarrassment as from fright. "Face it and put your hands against it," he commanded.

Having taken care of me, he went back to Amy.

"Maybe you're puttin' me on," he huffed, "but I can show you I'm the only one for the part. Account of I read the book, I know all about Hack Winston. He was a real lover man. And now I'm going to prove that I ought to be Hack Winston, so you won't forget it."

He paused, and I could hear him gulping air before he said, "Strip baby."

"What?" For the first time Amy sounded scared.

"You know what I mean." His voice was so sweet, and so menacing. "Take off your clothes."

Well, there are times when man no longer controls his destiny, when decisions and actions are thrust upon him without his consent, when he is a mere instrument of fate. For me, such a moment had arrived.

Whirling about, I lunged at the gunman, headlong in a diving tackle. I still can remember hanging there in the air, parallel to the floor, hands outstretched, eyes riveted to the gun which swung slowly toward me as I floated to meet it. Time, weight, space, gravity all vanished in that moment when there was nothing anywhere but me and the gun, the barrel sticking straight at my eye with nothing between them but diminishing space. Surely no one ever approached death with such certainty, or with more reluctance, but the force that had impelled me toward the gun also had stripped me of desires, hopes, and expectations. In a final reflex gesture I tried to escape the gun, but it was too late. Thunder and pain engulfed me as I plunged into darkness.

When I began climbing back from the pit of the unconscious the room was crammed with people, most of them peering down at me as if I were an interesting specimen stretched out on the floor.

The first faces I recognized were those of Amy and Lars.

"Where?" I mumbled.

"Where what?" Lars asked.

"The bullet. Where did it hit me? I can't feel anything." The absence of pain, I was sure, could only mean that I was paralyzed, all over.

"It didn't." Lars shook his head. "Far as I can tell, all you have is a bump on the skull."

"Can you move?" asked Amy.

Lars helped me into a chair.

"Where's the nut?" I asked.

"Over there." Amy pointed to a figure on the floor. "That's a doctor with him. He happened to be downstairs when I started yelling."

Among others in the room were Frankie Moline and Walter Driscoll. When he saw that I was off the floor Driscoll asked, "What happened?"

"Don't ask me," I said, "I'm a stranger here myself." Gently, I rubbed the lump on the side of my scalp.

"That man," Amy said, pointing to the psycho on the floor, "threatened me with a gun. Lee dived for him and knocked him down, and out. When they collided the gun went off, but the bullet missed, and they both were knocked out. That's when I ran to the door and started yelling at you and Frankie. Thank goodness you were out in the hall at the time."

"Where's the bullet?" Driscoll asked.

"I don't know." Amy looked around. "It's odd, but I can't see where it might have hit."

I stood up, and although I was a little dizzy, I walked over to where the doctor was bending over the gunman.

"What's with him?" I asked.

"Concussion." The doctor shrugged. "He'll come around soon. What happened?"

I told him what I remembered. "He must have hit his head when he fell," I suggested, pointing to the coffee table beside him.

"Probably," said the doctor, who seemed puzzled. "He's got a bump on the back of his head, but there's a bigger one on the side. Who was here at the time besides you?"

"Just Mrs. Phillips," I said, starting to nod toward Amy but thinking better of it when my head began to throb.

The doctor called her over and asked if she knew anything about the second bump, and she said "No."

"He'll be coming around any moment," the doctor said, pointing at the gunman. "Maybe we should tie him up."

Moline cut the cord off a Venetian blind and bound the gunman's hands and feet. He was just finishing when Police Chief Harkins showed up.

He asked for the gun, and Amy produced it, from under a pillow in a chair.

"I didn't want to have him find it if he came to," Amy

explained. "It's strange, but we can't find the bullet anywhere."

Harkins turned the gun over in his hand and said, "No wonder."

"This," he explained, "is the kind of gun a starter uses for races. It only shoots blanks."

I sank into a chair. All that fright and terror wasted on a toy pistol.

Chief Harkins looked at the figure on the floor. "I'll have to take him to the jail, and I'll have to get a doctor, and Mrs. Harkins will have to cook him some food." Turning to me, he added, "You folks sure have caused me a lot of trouble."

"Okay," I sighed. "Another hundred for the fund."

"Three," he suggested.

"Two," I said.

He nodded. "You can bring it with you when you come to the jail to sign the complaint."

The gunman began coming around, and Harkins led him away, handcuffed. I wondered if the chief charged his prisoners for board and room.

The doctor had a look at the bump on my head and said that except for a slight headache I'd be all right. Then he and the others left, and I asked Amy if she wanted to cancel out on the dinner.

"No," she said, "I'll be there. But before you go please close those doors to the balcony."

As I started across the room I stumbled over a small birch log from the wood basket beside the fireplace.

"How'd this get here?" I asked.

"Beats me," said Amy. "Excuse me while I get dressed." She hurried into the bedroom.

As I put the log back in the basket I knew how the gunman got that second bump on the head.

The dinner honoring Hoosier authors went off well, even

without the governor. The president of the historical society delivered a rosy tribute that put Amy right up there with George Ade, Booth Tarkington, and others; and when Amy's turn came she gave her Indiana literary heritage its due, so that everyone seemed pleased. With the elimination of the long-winded speech that I'd written for the governor, the program was completed early, and I went with Amy back to her suite. After the experience with the psycho, I was reluctant to see her left alone, and I was jumpy enough to enter the suite warily, half expecting to find someone lurking there.

I went around making sure all the windows were closed and locked and even looked into the closets.

"Expecting someone?" Amy asked.

"No, but I don't want another lump on my head," I said.

"Does it still hurt?"

"Only when I'm conscious," I said. "Do you suppose I could have a little of that pain killer from Phil Damen's bar?"

"Of course, but will you please pour your own. I still can't even stand the sight of it."

After I had poured myself an oversized drink and settled down in the most comfortable chair in the room, she said, "I believe I owe you that, and more, for saving me twice today—once from being a maniac and once from being had by a maniac. You were marvelous."

"It was . . ." I paused because I had been about to say it was nothing, but that was wrong. It had been something. "Let's just say it was worthwhile." And, looking at Amy, I meant every word of it.

"I was proud of you," I told her, "for the way you gulled that fellow about selecting him to play the part of Hack Winston. You lied like a veteran; I didn't think you had it in you."

She laughed. "Maybe I'd like to be honest, but I'm not

crazy. Anyway, those were strictly white lies. I told them only to save the life of the woman I love."

The phone rang, and it was UPI from Indianapolis, wanting more details about Amy's brush with the psycho. That was only the first of a number of calls from the Chicago, Indianapolis, and Louisville papers. While Amy and I talked over the schedule for the next day we also got calls from the AP and from a television network. The television people were interested in filming the "Amy Neal Day" ceremonies the next afternoon.

By the time I had disposed of them I was on my fourth oversized drink of that exquisite Scotch, and I noticed that my head no longer ached. I felt wonderfully relaxed, and I decided that this was a good time to try to find out something I had been wondering about for a long time.

"Did you call Arthur?" I asked, taking the sneaky approach.

"I put in a call to his hotel, but he wasn't there," she said. "I asked them to have him call when he comes in because I always like to have him learn about my escapades from me, instead of the newspapers."

After taking a sip of my drink, I decided to plunge ahead. "Speaking of Arthur, I've wondered how you two happened to, ah..." Now that I'd started, it wasn't so easy. "Maybe this is too personal, but I was wondering how you two happened to, ah, get married."

"Simple," she said. "We were in love."

"But, ah..." I hesitated long enough to swallow the rest of my drink. "Of course—I was married once myself—but I have a hard time in my mind when it comes to linking you up with Arthur. From what I've seen of the two of you, I don't see how you would have had a common interest."

"Oh but we did," Amy said, "a very common interest."

She was half smiling, and for some reason that kind of talk from her annoyed me.

"But aside from that," I persisted. "You obviously are interested in books, the arts, music, that sort of thing. Arthur's strictly a sports buff, not the arty type. At least that's the way it looks. Probably I'm way off base, but I can't help wondering."

She kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet under her. "And it's strange," she said, "but right now I can't help answering you."

"Fine." I crossed the room and splashed a little more whiskey in my glass.

"As I think I told you," Amy said, "I met Arthur when the university's athletic department paid me to tutor him so he wouldn't flunk English right when they needed him on the basketball team."

She paused to light a cigarette, then continued.

"You're right about Arthur not liking books. He won't admit it, but I'm sure he hasn't read *HOME OF THE HEART* all the way through. He's tried, dear boy, he's tried. But anything in print, except maybe a scorecard or a box score, bores him, and I'm positive he's never made it all the way to the end.

"So my job—I was on the athletic department payroll as an assistant to the basketball coach—was to inspire Arthur to read enough to pass a course in English literature. Well, I inspired him, he said, but not the way the coach had intended. In the first couple of weeks I discovered that getting him to read the books was a hopeless task, and so I took the easy way out by briefing him on the plots and characters to give him enough information to pass the tests. Pretty soon it was spring, and I was still briefing him, and Arthur said why do we have to sit around in a stuffy old library when you can tell me this junk just as well out in my car. So we went for rides, and after a while instead of just me teaching him we were teaching each other and we were in love."

She stopped and looked at my glass. "Maybe I could have just a little one of those with lots of soda," she suggested.

I made her a highball, and she sipped it quietly before continuing.

"But I haven't really answered your question. Actually, he didn't marry me. I married him. He never had a chance because I did everything but pull a gun on him."

"But why?"

"For one thing—I was crazy about him. For another, I was panic stricken. Here I was—leaving college, with no place to go, no home. I would have died before going back to Aunt Charlotte and Hawleyville. The easy way out was to get married, and Arthur was it. He was my refuge."

"I see." I didn't, but I was beginning to wish I'd never got her started on this.

"Don't misunderstand me," Amy added quickly. "Maybe ours was a marriage of convenience, but it has worked out; we've both gotten what we wanted out of it."

For once I didn't believe her, but maybe it was because I didn't want to, and, anyway, she was still married to Old Jug Ears. And I was sure he didn't know how lucky he was. Yawning, I stood up and said I thought I'd go to bed.

"Oh," Amy said. "So early?"

"It's after midnight," I told her, looking at my watch.

"Really?" Suddenly she seemed apprehensive, ill at ease. "I thought you might stay a while. Like maybe all night. Lee, after that business this evening I'm afraid to be alone. Could you stay? I mean you can have the bedroom, and I'll take the couch in here."

Of course I stayed, and of course I took the couch. Except for my shoes and jacket, I didn't undress, and my feet hung over the end of the couch, but I was tired enough to doze off right away, and it seemed I had been asleep for hours when I realized that the phone was ringing. I found it with one groping hand and the coffee table with my shins, and I

muttered "damn" at the same time I picked up the receiver.

"What's that?" asked the caller, and I was hooked up again with Old Jug Ears.

"I said 'damn' because I goddamn near broke my leg falling over a coffee table."

"Who is this?"

"Lee Medford."

"You *again*."

"Not again, yet. I've been the same person for over thirty years." Wake me up out of a sound sleep, and I'm a real cutup.

"You know what I mean. Let me talk to Amy."

"Sorry," I told him, "but she's asleep."

Trying to see it from his viewpoint, I suppose that did strike him as odd, and it took him a moment of deep thought before he asked, "If she's asleep, what the hell are you doing there?"

"Except when I'm answering the telephone, I'm sleeping too—on the couch in the sitting room. Amy's had a hell of a scare, and she doesn't want to be alone. So I'm standing guard."

"Is she all right?" At last he was showing signs of having some feelings.

"She's fine, but she's nervous, and I think she needs sleep right now, more than anything."

"I heard about it just now on the radio," Arthur said. "Some nut broke in, huh?"

"Yeah," I said, "some nut."

"Well," he said, "tell her I called. And, Lee, next time I call I don't want you answering the phone. Understand?"

I did, indeed, and in making me understand Arthur had touched a raw nerve. Here I had risked my life to save Old Jug Ear's wife from being molested by a maniac; here I was sleeping on a couch with my clothes on when all I had to do was to walk through an unlocked door and hop into bed

with her; and here he was telling me to stay away from her.

"Listen, Arthur," I said, trying to keep myself from shouting, "there is nothing that needs to be understood. I have no designs on your wife. For your information I am not interested because I have a nice fat book crammed with phone numbers of show girls, models, and actresses, all of them young, beautiful, and available. I have keys to the New York apartments of three bachelor girls, all of whom you've seen on the covers of magazines. The day is a long way off when I'm going to have to settle for a Minnesota housewife." That was a crummy way for me to talk, but Arthur had hit where it hurt by coming out and saying what I wasn't allowing myself the luxury of thinking.

"Now wait a minute." Arthur was indignant. "Don't you go selling Amy short. She's a hell of a lot prettier than those gals on the magazine covers, and if you were any judge of women you'd know that. And just because she's a housewife, that doesn't mean there's no romance in her. Housewives have glands and hormones too, you know. Probably a hell of a lot more than those stiff legged, fluffed up, sprayed on models and whatnot that you know in New York. Don't you go knocking Amy, my friend. When it comes to looks I'll match her with any of 'em."

If I hadn't been in a huff I suppose I'd have broken up laughing. Here I was alone with the guy's wife, and he was trying to sell me on her glamour.

"You've no reason to be knocking Amy," Arthur argued. "She's good enough for you, or anyone."

"Yes, Arthur, she certainly is." And I hung up before I added, "But too good for Arthur Phillips."

Chapter 20

AFTER hanging up on Arthur, I sat down on the couch, staring at the unlocked door to the bedroom and thinking. Then I tried not thinking about what I was thinking, and after a while I fell asleep.

When I woke up the sun was shining, a pillow was under my head, and a blanket was tucked around me. I could see the bedroom door, and I could imagine Amy slipping out to cover me, a vision that heated the blood, roused the flesh, and spurred me into action. For the first time since agreeing to stand watch, I knew what had to be done, and there was precious little time for doing it. Ignoring the aches in my bones and the stiffness of the muscles, I tiptoed across the room, picked up my shoes and coat, and got out of there.

No sentinel deserting his post ever was more conscious of his dereliction, yet I was unrepentant and brimming with rectitude, knowing that Amy's honor would be as safe with an intruder as with her guard. Maybe safer.

After shaving and changing my clothes, I went down to breakfast, and within minutes Walter Driscoll joined me, still obviously unaware that I'd sabotaged the golf course film. This was the day Walter and Irish were to go around town with Amy, photographing her in her native haunts—at the site of her father's store, at the drug store where she worked, at the home of an old school chum, with a former boyfriend, that sort of thing.

"She didn't have a boyfriend," I pointed out. "Her aunt kept her on a short leash."

Walter wasn't disturbed. "We'll have to phoney one up," he said. "There's got to be a little romance in this."

I didn't argue, but when he said he wanted her to visit her aunt and also her father's grave, I told him to forget it.

"Her aunt is suing her for libel," I said, "and I know she won't go to the cemetery."

"Well why not for christ's sake?" When Walter was annoyed he tried to be profane, but he wasn't very good at it. He was too prissy.

"Some things are private," I told him, and he was still mumbling to himself when I left him to phone the drug store and the Pizza.Parlor that now occupied the site where Amy's father had his shop.

I also called Nat Crowe at the Hi-Lo restaurant and asked if it would be all right to bring Amy in for breakfast and a round of picture taking.

"Ziggety yes," he said. "Just give me time to run home and get a clean shirt."

Amy was ready to go by the time I had finished on the telephone, and we found Nat Crowe waiting for us in the doorway of the Hi-Lo. He had on a fresh shirt and a bow tie, and he'd discarded the apron he usually wore while working.

Walter insisted that Amy eat at the counter while Irish got his pictures, and Nat kept reminding everyone that this

was just about the most ziggety day in his entire life. He didn't hide his disappointment when Amy balked at Irish's request for a shot of them kissing, but as we were leaving Amy perked him up by bussing him square on the mouth, after Irish had gone out to the car. I had a feeling that one was for old time's sake.

As we left, Nat stood in the door waving good-bye and glowing so brightly he was nearly fluorescent.

At the drug store Irish decided he wanted a shot of Amy being served an ice cream cone by the proprietor, who had bought the business several years ago from Amy's boss with the clammy hands. And at the Pizza Parlor he again got a shot of her sampling the product.

"Nothing like an ice cream cone and a slice of pizza to settle your breakfast," Amy observed, swallowing hard.

From the Pizza Parlor we headed Amy toward a visit with an old school chum, now married and a mother. Walter had insisted that Amy arrive unannounced, so Irish's camera could capture the astonishment and surprise of the reunion. The woman Amy had chosen to sneak up on was Mrs. Eleanor Baker, who had been Ellie Skinner when she and Amy were friends in high school.

She lived in a stucco bungalow out on the east side of town, and when we arrived two small boys were fighting over possession of a tricycle in the driveway, a toddler was trying to climb out of a playpen in the front yard, and a slightly larger child was thwarting him by smacking him on the head with a stuffed animal.

"I knew we should have called first," Amy said, surveying the domestic scene that included an abandoned bicycle on the front steps and a doll with only one leg on the sidewalk.

"Great," Driscoll said, looking at a couple of spots where the stucco had been recently patched and at a large hole in the front porch screen. "This'll make a great contrast."

"Let's get out of here," said Amy, but she couldn't get back into the car because I had a firm grip on her arm.

"It's too late," I said, steering her toward the house. "She's probably seen you by now."

While we waited, after I rang the bell, we could hear a baby crying and a woman saying, "You'll have to wait; I can't feed you now."

Then there were footsteps coming down the stairs, the door opened, and Amy was face to face with her old school chum.

"Hello Ellie," said Amy, smiling.

"Hello," said Ellie, looking at Amy as if she suspected her of selling encyclopedias.

"I'm Amy, Amy Neal."

"Amy!" Recognition flashed across Ellie's broad face. "What are you doing here?" She pushed open the screen door. "Come on in."

We all trooped in. Irish with his camera, Driscoll with the open notebook, and me with a feeling that somehow all this was a mistake.

Amy and Ellie embraced, and then Amy made the introductions while Ellie sought to push stray strands of hair into place, cover up a rip under the arm of her dress, and kick a toy fire engine out of the middle of the hall.

"What are you doing in Hawleyville?" Ellie asked, and when she heard Amy's explanation she was amazed, "Really, truly amazed."

"To think that you've written a book," she exclaimed. "How about that? What kind of a book is it?"

Amy explained that it was a novel.

"A novel? Well how about that?" Ellie's capacity for surprise seemed unlimited, and she looked around as if expecting the rest of us to share her amazement. "I'll have to read it sometime. Maybe they got it at the library."

"How have you been, Ellie?" Amy asked after one of those awkward pauses.

"Pregnant," said Ellie, with frankness and a touch of pride. "You know I married Dan Baker ten years ago; we have seven children, all in the last eight years. Dan says we got off to a slow start account we didn't know what caused it; you know Dan, a great kidder. Believe me, the kids and Dan keep me busy."

"Yes," said Amy, eyeing Ellie's ballooning middle, "I can see that."

After Ellie had heated a bottle for the baby, shouted out the window to tell Dan, Jr., to let Bobby have a turn on the tricycle for pete's sake, and warned from the front door that if Miriam hit baby Roger once more with that teddy bear she wouldn't be allowed to watch the Johnny Jump-Up show for a week, Amy was able to explain why we were there.

"*Focus* magazine?" Ellie began trying to straighten her hair and hide the rip in her dress all over again. "We read *Focus* all the time. Dan says it's the only magazine worth paying good money for." She jumped to her feet. "Oh my goodness, are we going to be one of those typical families *Focus* tells about all the time? You know, the Dan Bakers at home. One of those things? How about that?"

"It's going to be more along the line of Amy Neal, the novelist, visiting an old friend," said Walter, but his supercilious tone was wasted on Ellie, who was repeating, "The Dan Bakers at home." She was transported. "The kids too?"

Walter nodded. "Let's get started," he said, but Ellie was edging toward the doorway.

"Excuse me a moment," she called over her shoulder as she ran upstairs.

"Jesus," muttered Driscoll as he removed an accumulation of comic books, a baby's rattle, a toy truck, a sewing basket, and a pile of sox from the couch to make some sitting room.

"Whew," observed Irish, surveying his surroundings, "what a mess."

"Oh I don't know," Amy said, "personally I like a house that's been lived in."

"This is living?" Walter could sneer better than anybody in his block.

We waited, we lighted cigarettes, we checked our watches, and Amy said, "I wonder what in the world she's doing," as the front door opened with a bang and a young woman burst in, slightly out of breath.

"I'm Sally Birch, from next door," she announced, grabbing up a child's sweater from the coffee table and kicking a rubber ball through the doorway. "Ellie called and asked if I'd help straighten up a bit before the picture-taking." With a swoop, she collected a pile of diapers off a chair and a fishing rod off the floor.

"No pictures please," she said to Irish, who was cleaning the lens of his camera. "I'm a mess."

She got no argument there. Her hair was in curlers, and she was wearing a terry cloth robe, slacks, and bedroom slippers.

"Anyway, I'm nobody." With her foot she pushed a rubber doll under the couch while straightening the magazines on an end table. "Just Sally Birch from next door. Birch with an 'i'. We're the Bakers' best friends. You know, visits back and forth, cookouts together on Saturday nights, bridge games sometimes; we go to the same church and my husband Wilfred—that's with an 'e'—and Dan own a boat together out at the lake. If you'd like I could give you some pictures we took during the church picnic at the lake last summer. Shows the Bakers and the Birches. That's Birch with an 'i'."

Mrs. Birch-with-an-i was on her hands and knees in the middle of the room scooping up tinker toys into the pockets of her robe when the door burst open again, and the children we had seen playing in the yard trooped in, shepherded by a

young woman wearing blue jeans, a man's shirt, moccasins, and hair curlers. She had the child from the playpen under one arm.

"Upstairs," she commanded, somehow managing to shove all of the children in the right direction. "Got to get your faces washed for the nice photographer. Hi Sally." She nodded at the rest of us and vanished up the stairs.

"That's Grace Conrad from across the street," Sally said, shouting so she could be heard over the noise of the carpet sweeper she had hauled from a closet.

"What the hell?" mumbled Driscoll.

"Can't hear you," shouted Sally. "Lift your feet a minute, will you?"

Instead, Driscoll stomped out into the hall where he collided with a boy of about eight and a girl slightly younger as they raced through the door.

"Where's mommy, where's mommy?" shouted the girl. "Is the new baby here? Is that why we got out of school?"

Sally shut off the vacuum cleaner and sent her upstairs while the boy crawled around the living room floor.

"Where's my fire truck?" he asked. "Who's been messing things up?"

Sally got him started upstairs just before Dan Baker came in the front door. He was a big man with a crew cut, and he was wearing coveralls with "Baker's Service Station" embroidered in red over the breast pocket. "Ellie," he shouted, "what the hell's going on?"

Under Sally's directions, he, too, disappeared upstairs, and a minute later we heard him booming, "But, jeez, I ain't got the time. I got two cars on the rack now and three more waiting. I only came home because you said it was an emergency."

We couldn't hear the rest of it because a plump woman came in calling, "Ellie, Ellie, are you all right?"

"Yes, mother," Ellie answered. "Come on up."

"Heaven's sakes," Ellie's mother grumbled as she wheezed up the stairs, "from the way you were shouting on the phone I thought you must have had a miscarriage."

Miscarriage was the word all right, but not that kind. Thanks to Alexander Graham Bell and direct dialing, Driscoll's plan to get a couple of photos of Amy talking to one old friend was turning into a wide screen production with, perhaps, a cast of hundreds.

"For god's sake," Driscoll appealed to Amy, "stop her before she gets the whole town in here."

Amy shook her head. "You stop her; it's your show."

Driscoll went to the foot of the stairs and called, "Mrs. Baker, come on down. We've got a tight schedule, and we're going to have to leave in a couple of minutes."

That got some action, but not before we had been joined by Dan's parents and his brother, Alfred, who announced he was president of the Hawleyville Camera Club. He'd brought his own camera, just in case. Ellie's sister arrived, and she brought along their cousin, Monique, who was visiting from Elkhart.

Just before Ellie came downstairs the next door neighbor from the other side popped in.

"Who died?" she asked.

That completed the group except for two kids from across the street who were looking for their mother, a woman who was delivering eggs, and the boy from the bakery who brought the sweet rolls Ellie had ordered for serving with coffee after the picture-taking.

When Ellie came downstairs she was wearing a print dress, earrings, and an up-swept hair-do, and looking as if she were on the way to the Elk's Club dance. She was carrying her youngest.

"Oh, Christ," protested Driscoll.

Dan Baker followed in a dark suit, bow tie, and a deep frown. He was holding the child from the play pen in one

arm and herding the rest of the family along with his free hand.

"Oh, Jesus," moaned Driscoll.

An immense police dog wandered in from somewhere, jumped up on the couch and snarled at Amy until she moved, making it possible for him to stretch out for a nap.

"Mother of God," mumbled Driscoll.

Irish was standing on a chair in the corner shouting for Amy and Ellie to sit together by the fireplace, but no one was paying any attention to him, especially not Alfred Baker, Ellie's brother-in-law, who in addition to being a camera bug was a take-charge guy.

"Everybody over to the north wall," he shouted. "Ellie, you sit on the couch with Dan, with the kids on your laps and beside you. Everybody else get in behind the couch. We got to have you all in here."

"For keerist's sake," remarked Driscoll, almost as if he thought somebody was listening.

"Beat it Duke," said Ellie, cuffing the dog across the nose and settling herself on the couch.

Duke retreated, but, as if to prove his spirit wasn't broken, he took a passing nip at Irish who lost his balance and would have fallen from the chair if Driscoll hadn't grabbed him. I was beginning to understand what caused Irish to turn to the bottle on occasion.

"Holy jumpin' St. Peter," said Driscoll who now was talking to himself.

Finally Alfred got everyone arranged for the family portrait and stationed himself on the arm of the couch.

"Everybody say ^cheese'," he commanded.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Driscoll cried, pointing to Amy who had been left out of the group.

No one appeared to hear him, and while he was appealing profanely to various spiritual beings Irish went ahead and took a couple of pictures.

"Sure you got enough light there, buddy?" asked Alfred.

"Imagine us being in *Focus* magazine," said Ellie's mother.

"How about that?" sighed Ellie.

Gradually Driscoll began to accept the realities of the Baker household, and after Irish had taken shots from a couple more angles Walter managed to get the floor.

"Everybody except Ellie stay where you are," he shouted. "We'll want another group shot later. But first I'd like to get one of Ellie and Amy, alone, out in front."

As soon as Irish got the two of them together, sitting on the front steps, we were on our way.

"Don't you want another family group shot?" asked Alfred.

"How about some coffee?" asked Ellie.

"We haven't time for that," Driscoll said in his suave, nuts-to-you manner.

We left as fast as we could, although there was a temporary delay when I found Duke, the police dog, stretched out on the front seat of the car. Duke declined to leave until Ellie came out and smacked him on the nose.

"My god," muttered Driscoll, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief as we drove away.

"How about that?" asked Amy.

Driscoll never should have said what he said in front of a lady, but under the circumstances I'm sure Amy forgave him.

"Where to now?" asked Irish, who was driving.

"Out to see Amy's aunt," said Driscoll.

"Oh no." Amy was positive. "I'm not going there."

Taking the charitable view, I suppose it was partly the aftermath of the hubbub at Ellie Baker's house that made Driscoll act the way he did because even he normally wouldn't be that nasty.

"We're going to get pictures of you with Aunt Charlotte," he said. "What I mean is this: either we get pictures of you with your aunt or there'll be no HOME OF THE HEART layout in *Focus*. You can take your choice, sister."

It must have been his snarling tone that sent me over the top. Before Amy could react, I jumped in with both feet—right in my mouth.

“All right Driscoll,” I said, “you can call off this project any damn time you want to. But you can’t browbeat Amy. She doesn’t deserve that treatment from you, and I’m going to see that she doesn’t get it. You call her ‘sister’ once more, and you’ll get a fat lip.”

It was one of those things that you say and then wonder if that could have been you talking. I hardly believed it, and I was glad Lars Johnston wasn’t there. If he heard me hollering that way at someone important in the communications field, he would have me committed. In my time I’d cussed magazine editors, television producers, network executives, newspaper publishers, radio commentators, and some of the biggest names in the film industry—but never where they could hear me. In person, up to now, I’d always been all smiles—imperturbable, unruffled, un-insultable. Something had snapped, and I didn’t know why. Was it genuine concern for Amy? Or was it because I figured I had little to lose since I may have queered the *Focus* project the moment I exposed the film taken on the golf course? Was I just making a grandstand play in front of Amy? Even trying to be honest with myself, I didn’t know.

“Oh, all right,” Driscoll said sulkily, “I’m sorry Amy. Let’s go back to the club.”

I was silently congratulating myself and beginning to feel almost optimistic about the outcome of the entire Hawleyville bash, until we came to a viaduct under the railroad tracks. There, in ugly black letters more than a foot high, were scrawled the words, “AMY GO HOME.” If Amy saw them, she didn’t say so, but they gave me a foul feeling, a sort of creeping under the skin.

As we passed the Shanghai Lounge several of the leather-jacketed motorcycle riders who had been on the fringes of

the Foshay tryouts were lounging around, sitting on their machines or leaning against the building.

"Why are they still here?" Amy asked.

"Beats me." I tried to put a shrug in my voice. "I suppose they're just hanging around because they don't have anything else to do. They're harmless loafers."

As we drove up the drive to the country club we could see a crowd around the front door, and it was only after we had parked the car that I realized these were remnants of the Foshay tryouts. Some of them had spotted Amy, and we were surrounded before we could turn back.

Mostly they were kids, in their late teens or early twenties, and they didn't look so much mad as anxious. They wanted to know when, where, and how they could find out who won the talent contest, but more than that they wanted to know if there was any truth in the rumor that they all had heard—that Foshay had signed a couple of big name stars for the leads in *HOME OF THE HEART*.

"Just tell us," pleaded a tall, blond youth, who had appointed himself spokesman. "All we want to know is whether there's any point in hanging around. Is it true the stars already have been signed? Just tell us, yes or no."

I had to admit the kid was earnest and appealing, and I was doing my best to give him a straight-from-the-shoulder evasive answer when Amy broke in.

"Yes," she said, "the stars have been signed. But some of you may get other parts."

She began walking rapidly toward the clubhouse, and the stunned crowd parted to let us through. At first there was only silence, then murmuring behind us, and, as we reached the door, a scattering of boos and catcalls.

"Why," I asked, "did you do it?"

"I'm sorry," she said, "but they have a right to know."

"Taradiddle again, huh?" I was willing to try to understand.

"Yes, I suppose so." She disappeared into the bedroom to change for the luncheon Foshay Productions was giving for local leaders, and a few minutes later I found myself answering the phone and half hoping it would be Old Jug Ears, so he'd know he hadn't scared me away.

But it was Harkins, the police chief, and he wanted to know why I didn't come down to the jail and sign the complaint against the hood who had threatened Amy. I told him I couldn't afford it and hung up.

Amy's confession to the crowd outside must have upset me more than I realized, because when I took the time to think it over I was well aware that this was no time to be alienating the Hawleyville police force.

I found the key to the liquor cabinet and swallowed my pride and two fingers of Phil Damen's best booze at the same time. Then I phoned Chief Harkins, apologized, and told him I would be in later to sign a complaint and donate another three hundred dollars to his Police Benevolent League, or whatever he planned to call it.

The Foshay luncheon was intended to create some good will among the townsfolk, people like the President of Rotary, officers of the Boosters Association, the Mayor, the Superintendent of Schools, and so on. Even Ed Keating was invited, because he was editor of the Hawleyville *Argus*, but of course everyone was positive he wouldn't come. Everyone but Ed Keating.

I was shaking hands with the president of the Hawleyville Grocers Association when, over a shoulder, I saw Keating come to the door of the country club's dining room where I was standing in the receiving line next to Amy.

"God," I exclaimed, while still clasping the merchant's hand.

"Kirkwood," he corrected me. "Carleton Kirkwood."

"So glad you could come, Mr. Kirkwood," I said, passing

him along the line in a hurry, and then whispering to Amy that the man approaching us was Keating.

"I'll punch him right in the nose," Amy muttered.

"Take it easy," I pleaded. "Be diplomatic. Keep smiling and pass him along the line."

"All right," Amy promised, "I'll smile."

She did too. As I introduced him, she was all teeth, and she kept smiling brightly as she said: "I've been dying to meet you Mr. Keating, so I could punch you in the nose."

"Thank you, my dear, thank you," Keating murmured, moving on and shaking hands with Moline, who was next in line, before turning back to Amy in puzzlement.

"Excuse me," he said, "would you repeat that?"

"Certainly," said Amy, beaming as if she'd just been elected Homecoming Queen. "I said I've been dying to meet you so I could punch you in the nose."

"Yes, yes, that's what I thought you said," Keating muttered as Moline propelled him on down the line.

A few minutes later the receiving line broke up, and with Amy I moved toward the crowd around the bar. But we never made it.

Keating, who apparently still suspected there was something wrong with his hearing, intercepted us.

"So you're the lady who wants to punch my nose," said Keating, tentatively smiling at Amy as if he thought there had been a joke and he'd missed the point.

"I am," said Amy.

And she did. Smack dab on the button.

It was a sneak right hand punch, and all Keating could do in self-defense was blink.

That was all. One blow, and it was over so quickly that Keating was still smiling when blood spurted from his nostrils, dripped over his lips, and trickled down his chin.

I grabbed Amy to keep her from striking again, but it

wasn't necessary; she was rigid, white-faced, stunned by the sight of the wound.

Moline, whose boast was that he had seen everything, could only gape in mute horror, and it was Lars Johnston who leaped into the breach by handing Keating a handkerchief and steering him toward the washroom with a firm hand.

"Oh, god," Amy moaned. "I've got to go apologize." She tried to follow, but I held her back.

"Never mind," I said, turning her in the opposite direction. "You have just revised every known concept of public relations. Don't spoil it."

Chapter 21

ONLY one thing could be said for the luncheon that followed Amy's one punch victory over Ed Keating. It was endurable.

As the luncheon broke up I went with Amy to her suite so she could powder her nose, and from there I could hear the commotion outside. Standing on the small balcony outside her sitting room, I could see the front door where the luncheon guests were leaving. A crowd of well over a hundred persons clustered around the entrance, booing and jeering everyone who appeared.

Pacing back and forth, like pickets, several youths were carrying placards on which they had scrawled: "AMY GO HOME."

That was enough for me. When Amy came out of the bedroom I told her we were through, that "Amy Neal Day" was over.

"But I've promised to be at the ceremony," she protested.

"We can't call it off now." She looked at her watch. "It's only twenty minutes until the program starts."

I led her over to the window and pointed to the assembly of beatniks, would-be-actors, drifters, and hoodlums.

"But why me?" she asked. "What have I done to them?"

She'd told them the truth, that's what she'd done to them, but, since this was no time for a discussion of ethics, I said, "They've got to be sore at someone, and you're elected."

She turned away from the window and said, "Come on. I'm sorry for them, and I'm sorry for myself, but I can't back down now."

"Sure you can," I told her, closing and locking the doors to the balcony. "I'll go to the ceremony in the square, announce that you are ill, accept the key to the city in your behalf, and read the speech I wrote for you. Then I'll come back here, pick you up, and by tonight have you safe at home, hundreds of miles away." I pointed to the mob around the club entrance. "And those worms can go back under their rock."

"No," she said, "I'm going to pick up that key in person. I'm not innocent enough to think that all this is a spontaneous show of affection for Amy Neal, and yet it means something to me. Some of the people there will have come because they are friends of mine; maybe they want to see me. So I'll be there."

She started toward the door, but I caught her arm. "Amy, that's a mob down there. Nobody knows what a bunch of kooks like that might do. You can't go."

"I'm going." Her lips moved, but her teeth were clenched.

"Unuh." My fingers closed tighter around her arm.

"Let go." Her voice was harsh and her eyes as dark as they had been when she'd popped Ed Keating.

I let go.

In my time I've been in some scraps. But never with a woman. I know when I'm overmatched.

On the way into town Amy asked if I still had a copy of

the speech I had written for her, and I was able to whisk it out of my pocket.

"You'll see I've made a few changes here and there," I said, meaning that I'd knocked out the reference to the Pulitzer Prize that I'd awarded her without consulting the selection committee.

"I don't like the idea of reading a speech written by someone else," she said, "but right now I'm too upset to think of anything to say, on my own."

When we got to the courthouse square a fair-sized crowd already was gathered on the lawn, and I parked in a lot around the corner from the hotel. We had arranged to meet Howard Cadman, of the Boosters Club, the Mayor, and members of the city council in the hotel lobby and to go to the speakers' platform in a group. Moline and Lars Johnston were there, too, with the "gold key to the city," which was an all-around misnomer since it wasn't gold and Hawleyville was no city.

Lars and Moline went over first to check the public address system and to make sure there were the right number of chairs on the speakers' platform. They also were to check on the platform we'd had built for the photographers and had enlarged that morning. Originally we'd made room only for Irish and a couple of photographers from the Indianapolis papers, but interest in Amy's literary career had broadened after her near thing with the psycho, and we'd had to make arrangements at the last minute for photographers from the papers in Chicago and Louisville, the two press associations, and a television outfit.

As Amy appeared on the platform she was greeted by scattered applause from the people standing on the grass in front of the courthouse. It was a pretty fair crowd that must have totaled well over a thousand, and across the street a number of persons were sitting in the second and third floor windows of the business buildings.

First, I looked around for disgruntled movie applicants but saw none that I recognized, and then I looked for other potential trouble-makers, but I couldn't spot anyone who seemed menacing. After that I searched the crowd for Chief Harkins' police force, and the only uniform I saw was that of an officer who was keeping the cars moving in the street. The absence of police, in force, deepened my alarm, although at the moment everything was as quiet and peaceful as might be expected on the lawn of a small town courthouse on a warm, sunny afternoon in May.

We had an electric organ to provide appropriate music, and the soprano from the Methodist church choir sang the national anthem to get things under way. While the mayor made a short introductory speech to explain why we were there, I kept eyeing the crowd for trouble-makers. If disappointed actors didn't stir up a ruckus, there still was the chance of harassment from townsfolk who had been inflamed by Ed Keating's editorials, or by Amy's book.

Yet, from where I sat, the scene was entirely peaceful. Nat Crowe was there, in the front row, and back with a group of middle-aged women I spotted Aunt Charlotte, who was wearing a proud smile, which I thought I could understand. Who else in Hawleyville had a niece they could sue for one hundred thousand dollars? Ellie Baker and her brood were there. Ed Keating was nowhere in sight, but I spotted Phil Damen, perched on the back of an open sports car parked at the curb. Poor Ed. He had been injured and humiliated for doing what his employers had expected of him. And lucky Phil. He was unscathed, serene, and probably unaware of what had happened to his loyal worker. There was a lesson there somewhere, but I didn't have time to ponder it because the mayor had started reading the short introductory speech I had written for him. He then introduced Howard Cadman, president of the Boosters Club, who was to read more of the Medford prose.

The speech I had written for him was as Hoosier as the banks of the Wabash. It was laced with references to Indiana literary heroes and with quotations from their works, including George Ade—"A good folly is worth what you pay for it"—and James Whitcomb Riley—"the ripest peach is highest on the tree."

Of course I didn't forget Booth Tarkington—"There are two things that will be believed of any man whatsoever, and one of them is that he has taken to drink." Don't ask me how I managed to work that one in, but it was the best I could do without actually reading something he had written.

And I remembered "Abe Martin"—"It's no disgrace t' be poor, but it might as well be."

By the time Amy's name came up I had her in some high class company; nor did I forget to have Cadman remark that it has been said "every Hoosier is born with a pen in his hand."

As for Amy's literary stature, I had him comparing her with Charlotte Brontë, Louisa May Alcott, Cornelia Otis Skinner, Edna Ferber, and several others whose names I had plucked from the index of an anthology.

When he called Amy forward to hand her the gold key she got a good hand, but I was sure I detected some scattered boos. The crowd settled down as she began reading her speech which I had crammed with tributes to her Indiana literary heritage.

With apprehension, I kept scanning the crowd for signs of trouble, and my uneasiness grew as I spotted several hold-overs from the Foshay tryouts. But as I watched them they seemed harmless enough, and I had just about convinced myself I was worrying for no reason when a pair of motor-cycles came slowly into the street around the square, then raced their engines with mufflers wide open as they rumbled past the speakers' stand, momentarily drowning Amy's words with the thunder of their exhausts.

In a moment they were gone, but while I was searching the crowd vainly for further evidence of the Hawleyville police force the cyclists came grinding back, riding slowly on the far side of the crowd and switching their ignitions on and off until the backfiring of the engines crackled across the square like gunfire.

Amy continued to read on, doggedly, although few of her words were being heard. She now had reached the point where she was proclaiming her devotion to old friends.

Although I was scanning the crowd anxiously, I never saw the firecracker that exploded at my feet with a blast that bounced me six inches off the chair. A low murmur, ominous as distant thunder, rolled across the crowd as the motorcycle engines alternately roared and popped. From somewhere a voice cried, "Amy Go Home."

A wave of booing began somewhere in the rear and rolled across the crowd, breaking harshly against the speakers' stand. But Amy never wavered.

"Forsake not an old friend, for the new is not comparable to him," she said into the microphone, quoting from the Bible. "A new friend is as new wine: when it is old, thou shalt drink it with pleasure."

Amy did have one friend, in Howard Cadman who stepped to the front of the platform with his arms held high and wide in an appeal for silence. But the booing continued, and as Amy launched into the remarks I had written on the joys of returning to her birthplace an egg arched out of the crowd and went splat against Cadman's forehead. As the yolk slithered down the bridge of his nose, Amy, ploughing ahead, quoted Cicero:

"There is no place more delightful than home."

"Oh, god," I moaned, as a tomato sailed over Amy's head and landed in the first row of city council members seated behind her. Leaping up, I went to Amy's side. "Saw it off," I told her, "saw it off." But if she heard me she gave no sign.

Seemingly mesmerized, she plunged into a quotation I had taken from Longfellow:

Stay, stay at home, my heart, and rest;
Home-keeping hearts are happiest.

Another tomato splattered on the corner of the lectern, its fragments splashing into Amy's face.

A rock glanced off my shoulder and hit Cadman over the eye. He yowled with pain but stood firm and resolute, like a captain going down with his ship, stretching out his arms in a vain plea for order. Seemingly transfixed, he didn't twitch as a withered head of lettuce bounced off his chest and a banana peel plopped against the side of his face.

A bearded hoodlum jerked the microphone from the platform and shouted into it, "Amy Go Home." Others joined the clamor until it became a chant, swelling and resounding from all sides like a tormented wail from the far side of the Styx. Rotting fruit rained on the platform, more cyclists added to the cacophony of racing, backfiring motors spinning around the square, and in the distance a fire siren began to shriek.

At my feet Nat Crowe was grappling with the bearded one who had grabbed the microphone, which now was in the hands of a stringy-haired, splotchy-faced girl who was screaming, "Amy Go Home." Fights were breaking out, children were screaming for their mothers, and their mothers were screaming for Amy to go home. Rioters were swarming over the photographers' stand, and Walter Driscoll, nearly blind without his glasses, was groping through the turmoil, searching for sanctuary.

All the frustrations and disappointments of the movie applicants who had glimpsed their rainbow in the Foshay tryouts boiled to the surface as their pot of gold turned into a cauldron of swinging fists and screaming voices. Foe fought foe, friend fought friend, and reason gave way to chaos.

Many of the townsfolk, always close to boredom's breaking point from the sameness of their days, joined the fray willy-nilly in a senseless mass tantrum. For me, there was only one logical course of action—to run like hell.

I grabbed Amy's arm, pulling her after me, lifted her over the platform railing, and dropped her to the ground. Vaulting the railing, I came down on a leather-jacketed hoodlum who was grabbing at Amy, and I must have hit a vital spot because he was rolling on the ground and clutching at his middle as I took Amy's hand and yelled, "Run."

She did, surprisingly fast. We charged headlong through the melee with no idea of where we were going, except to get out of the mob. We leaped over a man who was cringing on the ground and crying, "Save me, save me," circled a huddle of women who were swinging their handbags and fists at a cowering male with his head buried in his arms, and pushed through a line of children standing stock still and staring at their elders in stupefied horror. With a surge, we broke through the outer fringes of the crowd, reached the street and raced across it, dodging motorcycles, a police car, a truck loaded with pigs, and Frankie Moline who, while hurtling along, was crying, "Kill me somebody, kill me." Frankie was pursued by two muscled morons who seemed willing to oblige him.

Spotting an opening between two buildings, I pulled Amy with me and ducked into an alley. We raced past garbage cans and piles of refuse for half a block until our escape route came to a sudden, chilling dead end.

Ahead of us was a blank wall, unbroken except for a single barred window. Nor was there any escape through the buildings on either side. I tried a door in one of them, but it was locked, and no one answered although I hammered on the wood until the skin on my knuckles cracked. A door on the other side also refused to budge, and I was trying to kick it in when Amy screamed and pointed to the opening in our

cul-de-sac. It was solid with screaming, baying hoodlums pouring into our alleyway.

Sharp fingers of fear kneaded my belly, choked off my breath, and drummed along my spine. This was how "Amy Neal Day" was to end, in an alley with a burst of maniacal frenzy. Already I could feel the hoodlums' fists smashing my lips against splintering teeth, their knees digging into my groin, their feet stomping my kidneys as I writhed in the dirt of the alley. I could sense their grimy hands clutching at Amy's dress, tearing, grabbing swarming over her. Lurching, I threw myself wildly against the closed door, and when it held fast I reeled backward, tripping and falling and landing face down on the ground. I might have stayed there, hiding my face from the stones and trash that rained around me as the mob oozed forward, but strong fingers pulled at my arm, and I scrambled to my feet. Letting go of me, Amy reached down and picked up a broken brick. "Here," she said, handing it to me.

With her other hand, she grasped an empty whiskey bottle by its neck, and, standing flat-footed, faced the phalanx of rioters that edged toward us, their dozen or more menacing bodies filling the alley from side to side. Her lips were tight, her eyes burning with defiance, the cords in her neck visibly taut.

As I saw her jutting chin, her clenched fist, her back-to-the-wall stance, I got the wild and feverish feeling that the two of us could whip the whole god damn world.

That was it, we'd lick 'em all, just the two of us. Only it didn't work out that way.

I didn't see the car until the line of hoodlums scattered to keep from being run down, but there it was, a low-slung open sports car a hundred feet away, and it was bearing down on us with engine roaring and brakes squealing. Inches short of crushing us against the wall, it slid to a stop,

and the driver said, "Hop in." Phil Damen was behind the wheel.

Without opening the door, I boosted Amy into the car, shoved her down into the single seat beside the driver and draped myself over her as a shield from whatever was to come.

"Hang on," Damen shouted. "We're going out—backwards." He was grinning.

Throwing the car into reverse, he hurled us back toward the mob, scattering the rioters as they flattened themselves against the building walls. With a grinding of gears and a squealing of tires, we seemed to be clearing the mob until, at the last moment, one maniac, wearing dungarees and a sweatshirt, threw himself atop the hood, grasped the edge of the windshield with one bony hand and started drawing himself toward us, his eyes dilated with hysteria, his mouth twisted into a revolting snarl. Quickly he pulled himself to his feet and lunged headlong over the windshield. Crouched as I was, over Amy, all I could do was gasp, and it wasn't until his fist flashed past my face that I saw the jack handle in Phil Damen's hand. It caught our frenzied assailant on the side of the face with a sickening splat and knocked him sideways so that he was rolling over me when with one free hand I managed to push him off the car. He fell to the ground with a plop, and as we streaked out of the alley into the street I could see the rest of the mob staring at him, bug-eyed and pasty-faced with the knowledge it could have happened to any of them.

Once in the street, Damen hurtled the car forward through a red light and zoomed out of town. As we passed the city limits his lips were drawn into a tight smile and his eyes were bright. He was enjoying himself.

Chapter 22

A MILE or so out of town Damen stopped the car long enough for Amy and me to change places, so she could sit on my lap. Pale and trembling, she buried her head against my chest, and I wrapped her in my arms, stroking her soft hair and trying to be reassuring.

Five or six miles farther Damen turned off the main highway on to a side road leading into the hills, but he never slackened his pace as we thundered along, twisting with the roadway into valleys, over narrow bridges, up slopes where there was no passing room, over the crests, and past hidden drives that vanished into thick woods. It was wild country, untamed as our driver who was skidding through the sharp turns and smiling to himself as the wind ruffled his sparse hair and the car's roaring engine responded to his sure touch.

As we raced toward the afternoon sun with the road's loose gravel pinging against the fenders and the bleat of the

horn proclaiming our test of fate at each blind corner, I sensed the jubilation that had engulfed Phil Damen, and I became more aware of my own sensation which, rather than fear, was one of pleasure, stirred by the act of holding Amy close.

While I was contemplating the soft lines of her body and the fragrance of her hair, we skidded to a stop and Damen hopped out of the car to unlock a gate barring entry into a narrow lane that led deeper into the woods. We drove, at a slower pace, under towering trees for perhaps an eighth of a mile until we came to a clearing beside a brook where there was a log lodge. Jumping from the car, Damen said, "Come on," and unlocked the front door.

Amy, who hadn't spoken since our rescue from the mob, was quivering so that I had to carry her into the building. I put her in a chair while Damen went around snapping on lights and opening windows.

"This is a hideout of mine," he said. "You like it?"

"Magnificent," I said. The room we were in was maybe thirty feet long and finished with exquisite taste. The furnishings included easy chairs, coffee tables, lamps, and an enormous couch facing a fireplace built of rough stone.

"I sometimes hunt here," said Damen, lighting the log fire with an electric gadget. "Want to see the rest of it?"

He led me into the bedroom where I blinked and said nothing. The furnishings were oddly feminine for a hunting lodge.

"Two baths," he said, pointing to the doors on opposite sides of the room. "His and hers."

I began to get the idea that you didn't need a license for the kind of hunting that brought Phil Damen so deep into the woods.

The only other room was a pine-paneled kitchen. "There's plenty of food in the refrigerator," he said.

Back in the living room, he pointed to the doors at one end. "The bar's in there," he said. "Help yourself."

He started for the door but stopped. "Oh, yes." He reached into a cabinet and handed me a set of car keys. "Stay as long as you like. There's a station wagon in the garage, which you can use. Later on you can figure out how to get it back to me. If you take it to Indianapolis, leave the keys at the information desk at the airport. Tell the attendant to give them to Babs, along with the parking check. She'll return the car."

Without saying good-bye he went out the door, and I followed him. "Thanks," I said, as we stood beside the car.

"It was a pleasure," he said, laughing. "Hawleyville hasn't had so much excitement since Morgan's Raiders went through here."

I held out my hand. "I don't know why you did it," I said, "but we owe you a lot, and I'm grateful."

"I don't know why either." His laugh was half sneer. "Usually, I don't rescue women in distress; that's the way I leave 'em."

"Thanks anyway," I said. "Coming into that alley after us was risky business."

"And that, my friend," he said, shaking a finger at me, "is the value of leading a worthless life. You've nothing to lose."

He opened the car door and lowered himself behind the wheel. "Just one thing." Slipping the car into gear, he dropped his bantering tone. "Be kind to her."

He let out the clutch and whirled the car down the lane without saying good-bye.

When I went back inside Amy was sitting in the chair where I had left her.

"Cigarette?" I asked, holding out a package which she waved away without speaking.

I went over to the bar, dropped a couple of ice cubes into an old-fashioned glass and filled it with bourbon.

"Here, this will cure what ails you." When I put my hand on her shoulder, she was shivering.

"Come over by the fire," I said, leading her to the couch that faced it. Then I closed the windows. Although the sun was still up, the woods around us were so thick it was almost dark inside, except for the glow from the fireplace.

I poured myself a drink like the one I'd made for Amy, but when I returned to the couch she was sitting as I had left her, the drink untouched.

"Come on," I told her. "We both need this." I took a long swallow, and after a moment she did, too.

I sat down beside her, kicked off my shoes, put my feet up on the coffee table, and enjoyed the warming of the whiskey trickling through my system. We sat sipping the drinks without speaking until she asked, "Where's Phil Damen?"

"He went back to town," I told her. "There's another car in the garage we can use whenever we want to leave."

"Why did he rescue us?" She was staring at the fire.

"I don't think he really knows, except that he's a fan of yours. I believe he thinks you're a lady."

"Some lady," she muttered. "A fine lady who goes around punching people and starting riots."

"You didn't start anything," I pointed out. "It was those hoods who came into town for the Foshay tryouts."

My glass was empty, and I went back to the bar for a refill. When I returned she said, "We ought to be getting out of here."

"Yes we should," I agreed, sitting down.

Some color had returned to Amy's face. "Those kids in the park," she said, "they weren't the cause of that disaster; they were only a symptom. It was this ravenous craving for publicity, this screaming for attention that brought on the riot. Those kids were just the victims—victims of your dishonesty."

"Dishonesty?" I jumped to my feet so fast most of the whiskey spilled from my glass. "Dishonesty, hell!" The size of the drink, the heat from the fire, and the reaction to the afternoon's excitement must have blown my safety valve.

"It wasn't the dishonesty," I said, standing over her and pointing a finger at the tip of her nose. "It was you, your mania for the truth. Honesty, that's what did us in. Blind senseless honesty. Look at your book; it was so damn honest that people in Hawleyville got hurt."

I sat down again because standing over her she looked so helpless, and I didn't want to forget that she was about as weak as a mama polar bear. "Then by lashing out at Foshay you may have wrecked the filming of your novel. And as if that wasn't enough you had to be so crazy honest that you blew the whistle on Foshay's tryouts. That's what started the riot and got us run out of town; not the promotion program."

With a bang, she slammed her glass down on the coffee table and jumped up. Striding across to the fireplace, she rested her arms on the mantel and peered at the flames as she said:

"You simply won't face up. You refuse to recognize things as they really are."

She whirled around to face me.

"We're in trouble because of the posing, the pretense, the sham, and your own make-believe. Take 'Amy Neal Day.' Completely phoney from beginning to end. It wasn't my idea; nor the idea of any one in Hawleyville. Really, it was 'Lee Medford Day.' You conceived it, paid for it, arranged it—all for the benefit of persons with no ties to Hawleyville, or to me either. All of it was fakery."

"The hell it was." I jumped up, but I didn't go near her for fear that I might slug her. I was that shook up.

"Like hell it wasn't!" She was shouting now. "It was a sham. You can't see it, and you never will because you're all flim-flam, hokum, bosh, and deceit. You, and Moline, and

that old bullfrog Foshay, you're all drowning yourselves in pretentious nonsense."

"All right." I was determined to play it cool. "Suppose you're right. I don't say you are, but for the time being let's just suppose it. And let's agree, for the moment, that everything I stand for is pretense." I was sure I was regaining control, at least of myself. "So I'm the great pretender. So how about yourself?"

"Me?" She was startled.

"You," I said smugly, pleased with having caught her off balance. "You, Amy Neal Phillips." I put the emphasis on the last name. "Every time you refer to yourself as Mrs. Phillips, isn't that pretense? How can you pretend to be in love with Arthur Phillips?"

"What?" Her expression changed from startled to astounded.

"You know what I mean." I'd gone too far, and I was ashamed of myself, but I couldn't quit now, even though the muscles in my legs were quivering. "You can't possibly be in love with that fugitive from Muscle Beach. Old Jug Ears has won so many loving cups he even looks like one. But did he ever win a prize for loving you? He's still a kid, playing games; he's not even a man."

She came at me, swinging.

But I was ready for her, and I grabbed her arms so she couldn't touch me, except when she kicked me in the shin, and then I pulled her so close she couldn't get any leverage. And that's the way we stood, glaring eye-to-eye.

At least I think that's the way it was. I can't remember too clearly because all at once we were kissing, and I was wrapping her in my arms, and she was pressing herself against me so hard I could feel the thumping of her heart. I have no idea how long we stood there, but when I tried to pull her down to the couch she pushed away and pointed to the bedroom.

When I awoke it was light, and, instinctively, I reached for Amy, but my groping hands found only the pillow and the bedclothes. Suddenly, starkly awake, I found myself alone.

Amy was gone.

Chapter 23

I was frantic. "Amy." I was storming around looking everywhere, even in the closets. "Amy!" Her clothes were gone. "Where are you?" The living room was empty, but I heard a noise in the kitchen, and I found her there.

She was fully dressed, cooking breakfast.

"Thank god," I said, leaning against the refrigerator. "I thought something had happened to you."

"It did," she said drily. Then, surveying me coldly, she added, "Around here, we dress for breakfast."

Her tone and manner made me feel as if I'd been found stark naked in the kitchen of a strange woman who was horrified.

"Oh, excuse me." I was blushing all over. Really. "Back in a minute," I mumbled.

In Phil Damen's closet I found a dressing gown and some slippers and hurried back to the kitchen, anxious to pick up where we'd left off in the bedroom. But when I approached

her she turned from the stove, with a hot skillet in her hand.

"Go sit over there," she said, pointing at a table. "I'll give you some breakfast in a minute."

"Who's hungry?" I asked, keeping my eye on the target, and reaching for her.

"Sit down," she said, keeping the skillet between us. "You touch me, and I'll bop you with this pan."

"Huh?" I didn't believe her, but I wasn't going to risk it. "What goes?" I asked, backing away.

"Sit down," she repeated. "And keep quiet."

I sat down, but I couldn't keep quiet. "What's wrong? I'm the fellow who loves you. Remember? I'm the one who wants to marry you. Remember? I'm the one you said made you . . ."

"Yes," she cut me off. "I remember."

"Then why the chill?" I was baffled. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No." She shook her head. "But maybe I did."

"Amy," I pleaded, getting up and starting toward her. "There's nothing wrong with two people being in love."

"Hold it," she said, facing me again with the skillet in her hand. "Go back and sit down unless you want these eggs square in the eye."

Having seen that look before, I retreated.

"Amy," I pleaded, "I want to marry you."

"You forget," she said, taking an egg from the pan. "I'm already married."

"Oh that." I shrugged. "A technicality."

"No," she said, "it's more than that. It's me. I'm just not the type to walk out on a husband and child and run away with a man I hardly know."

"You knew me well enough last night," I pointed out.

"A gentleman," she said, lifting the rest of the eggs from the pan to a plate, "wouldn't mention that."

"All right, so I'm not a gentleman," I said, standing up

again. "I'm just a fellow who's proposing marriage. What in the name of Emily Post is wrong with that?"

"Let's just say that Emily Post frowns on marriage proposals to women who already have husbands." She handed me the plate and motioned toward the table. "I'm going back to Laketon to think about your very generous offer. I need a cooling-off period."

I went back to the table, and she sat down across from me.

"And what becomes of me while you're cooling off?" I asked.

"I don't know." She handed me a cup of coffee. "Maybe you'll cool off."

"Never," I vowed, reaching for her hand, which she pulled away.

"Eat," she commanded, pointing to the food.

I tried, but I couldn't get much past that lump in my throat.

"All right," I said, disappointment bubbling into anger, "so you're the great apostle of integrity and honesty. "What's so honest about going to live with your husband, if you're in love with me?"

"Who said I'm in love with you?" She bit into a piece of toast as if she expected it to snap back.

"You did. Last night."

"Well, that was last night, and this is today," she said. "That was my heart. Today I have a brain."

"So," I said, sure that I had her trapped. "Ask your brain just one question. Ask if it loves Lee Medford. Go ahead, I dare you."

She was staring out the window. "What does it say?" I repeated.

"Yes." She was snappish. "It says yes."

I made another grab for her, but she jerked away.

"Amy," I pleaded, "if you love me, how can you go off and live with someone else?"

"I don't know." She pushed her plate away. "Maybe I don't love you in Minnesota. Maybe I love you only in Indiana. I want to think about that. And I want to do it at home, in my own house. That's the only way I'll ever know."

"Amy's law." I suppose my voice was bitter. "A Mann Act for amateurs. You can't transport love across state lines. Is that it?"

"You're being vulgar." She sniffed. .

"Also sensible," I said. "What's the difference between love in Minnesota and Indiana?"

"Maybe none," she admitted, "but I'm going home to find out."

Bitterly, I wondered if she meant to test me against Old Jug Ears, but I had sense enough not to ask, especially since I didn't really believe it myself. Any other woman maybe, but not Amy.

We sat there for a while, staring at each other and saying nothing, partly because my throat was so dry I was afraid that if I tried to speak I'd croak like a frog.

"How will I know?" I managed to ask after a swallow of coffee. "How will I know if you decide in my favor?"

"I'll let you know." Her voice was thin and strained. "As Mr. Foshay would say, don't call me, I'll call you."

"Thanks," I said with more asperity than I intended. "There I'll be—just me and the telephone."

"Please don't be angry." She was pleading. "I *want* to be with you." With her elbows resting on the table, she ran her fingers up and down the edge of her scalp. "Surely you know that I've been falling in love with you for some time. And I suppose that's the real reason I came to Hawleyville—not to be a party to this silly razzmatazz but just to be with you. Holy Moley, I have feelings too, but I just can't let myself go berserk."

"What do I do while I'm waiting to hear from you?" I asked. "Enroll in a monastery?"

She stood up. "Here's what you can do. You can go get dressed. After I wash the dishes I'm leaving for the Indianapolis airport. You can ride along if you wish."

"You're so kind." I tried to stomp out, but Phil Damen's slippers were too big, and I lost one of them. Instead of picking it up, I gave it a kick across the room.

When I returned, ready to travel, Amy was wiping up the sink, and her eyes were red.

"You been crying?" I asked, hopefully.

"Yes," she said, angry because I'd noticed. "It's an old allergy. I always cry at the sight of dirty dishes."

I tried to kiss her, but she whacked me on the side of the face with the wet dish cloth.

Stomping out of the house, I told myself I must be out of my mind to think that I was in love with a woman who would do a thing like that and promised myself I wouldn't even speak all the way to Indianapolis—a resolve that lasted until she joined me in the station wagon, or about ninety seconds. We argued every foot of the way to the airport.

"The trouble with you is that you're suffering from manic-sincerity," I told her. "It's a disease. And look at its effects—ill will in your own home town, estrangement from your closest relative, violence, even bloodshed. Why not accept the fact that the world always has had its deceptions and always will? Then your life would be so much simpler."

"Maybe it would be." She sat on the far side of the seat, refusing to even look at me. "And maybe I even wish I could do that. But that's not me, and I can't change."

I didn't think she could either, but I intended to keep trying.

"It's all a matter of attitudes," I insisted. "For instance, there's another word for taradiddle that I think even you would find acceptable."

"What's that?" She seemed interested.

"Showmanship."

"Um-hmmm," she nodded. "And I know another word for it."

"What?" I asked, knowing I shouldn't.

"Crap."

She had a point there, but I wasn't going to admit it, and we kept snapping at each other until I parked the car at the airport.

"I'll go see about your ticket," I said.

"Never mind," she said. "I'll do it while you take the car keys to Phil Damen's girl friend."

It took longer than I'd expected to arrange for return of the car to Hawleyville, and when I rejoined Amy she was reading a New York paper. Her lips were set, and she had that look she always got just before she clobbered someone.

"What's the matter?" I was careful to keep my distance.

Without saying anything she handed me the paper and pointed to what she had been reading. It was a book review column, and the writer was taking a second look at *HOME OF THE HEART* in the wake of the award of the Pulitzer Prize. He had decided that his earlier assessment—which had called the novel a "contemporary masterpiece"—was much too generous. After more thoughtful consideration, his judgment was that the novel lacked genuine feeling and that Amy had no true sense of proportion, having presented characters that were overdrawn, bigger than life. All this had been written by my friend, the one who had assured me Amy couldn't miss getting the Pulitzer award.

Angrily, I ripped the page in two. "When I get back to New York," I vowed, "I'm going to slug him."

Amy's response was, to say the least, curious. She began laughing, and she kept it up until people were staring.

"Shush," I told her. "What's so funny?"

She took a hankchief from her purse and wiped her eyes. "I just can't imagine *you* punching anyone. That's *my* approach. Remember? You're the one who can solve every-

thing with words. All it takes is good, sensible, public relations. Remember?"

She was mocking me, but I wasn't amused. "The bastard had no cause to write that," I told her.

"Maybe he did," Amy said. "Maybe it *was* a poor book. Maybe all its success does belong to the press agents, the promotion boys, the salesmen, the advertisers, the communicators—all of you taradiddle experts."

"That's nonsense," I said. "It's a great book, and you know it."

For the first time that day she agreed with me. "Yes, I do know it. Maybe that's why I don't get really angry with things like that." She pointed at the torn paper under my feet.

"Amy, darling . . ." I tried to embrace her, but she stepped back so quickly she bumped into two women who looked over their shoulders at me as if they were thinking of calling a cop.

Then Amy's flight was announced, and she said, "Good-bye Lee"

She wouldn't even shake hands.

"Good-bye," she repeated.

That was all. She turned and walked away, and as I watched her go I thought about how much of her there was in her walk—the rhythmic grace, the firmness, the pluck—and I knew that no matter what happened she'd be all right, that she'd find her way. For her, there were the guideposts she'd been planting all her life.

But what was there for me?

Epilogue

Where were we?" Walter Driscoll, having dragged me into a bar and then deserted me to join someone else, had returned, without explanation or apology. "Oh yeah, we were talking about that Hoosier hoedown where you were plugging HOME OF THE HEART. Keerist, what a time! And what a money-maker that movie turned out to be, second biggest of all time."

"Yeah," I nodded.

"I suppose you know about old Foshay." Basically, Walter was a gossip, and that was one of his less reprehensible traits.

"What about old Foshay?" I knew, but I wanted to hear Walter's version.

"He lost control of Foshay Productions to a Wall Street crowd that forced him out because of the uproar over that phony talent contest." Walter always looked pleased when he bore bad tidings. "I hear he's in retirement, living in Italy."

"That's interesting." It was like Walter to know only part of the story. I thought of telling him more, that Lee Medford Associates was now handling all public relations for Foshay Productions. But he didn't give me a chance.

"And did you hear about Frankie Moline?" Walter was leaning on the bar as if it were the back fence.

"Un-uh," I lied.

"Before he was ousted himself, Foshay fired Moline for spending all that money on the Foshay Suite in that fleabag at Hawleyville. But I hear Frankie's in business for himself now. Francis Moline and Associates, no less."

"H-m-m-m." That was the best I could do while thinking about how to escape from Walter without actually telling him he was a bore.

"And how about Amy?" he asked. "Do you ever see her?"

"Occasionally." I swallowed the rest of my drink before adding, "We've been married for over a year."

That got him. Walter was surprised, flustered, and a little bit sore because we'd done this without telling him. After he finished his mixture of congratulations and apologies for being uninformed, he said:

"I hope you both understand it wasn't my idea to kill that Hawleyville story in Focus. True, I was sore because you'd ruined the film that was taken on the golf course, but it was the big boss who killed the article on the grounds that it just wasn't right for Focus. I fought him on it, so hard I damn near lost my job."

I put down my glass and faced Walter.

"Taradiddle," I said and walked away without saying good-bye.

At the door I glanced back, and Walter was still standing there, staring after me. He didn't understand.

And he never will.

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